













# THE RED LACQUER CASE

By  
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## THE RED LACQUER CASE



## CHAPTER I

The front door of Jane Bainwright's cottage opened straight into the living room. There were in this room the following objects: inlaid linoleum floor, on which were thrown several small Wilton rugs, two large chairs, and a much-worn sofa, facing the large open fireplace. Ralph Sanders, who occupied the latter, was not really being fair to its well-cushioned curves. He sat on the extreme edge, elbow on knee, chin in hand and looked frowningly into the fire.

Jane, eyeing him, thought him somewhat altered. His round face was not as rosy as it should have been, but, after all seven years were seven years, and some of these she knew might readily count for double.

Jane was sitting on the floor in front of the fire, her lap full of papers which she was sorting. On her right she made a small pile of those she wished to keep. On her left a heap to be destroyed.

"It's exactly like a grab-bag," she said. "Cousin Mary kept everything, and I never know whether I'm going to come across a five dollar bill or an invitation to a charity bazaar."

"This Cousin Mary, was she good to you? Have you been happy here?"

Jane looked up. Her very candid eyes held a little humor.

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"Oh, well," she said, "she simply hated me because I had to do things for her, and she'd always been so frightfully independent." She sighed deeply. "It was very decent of her to leave me everything—"

"Two and a half years you were with her?" asked the man on the arm of the sofa. Jane nodded.

He rose and walked over to the fire, the little lines on his face creased in deep thought. When he had pushed the log with his foot he said:

"And why were you with her at all? Why do I not find you happily married?"

Jane's color rose a little.

"Yes, Ralph," she said slowly, "we are both in the same boat, bachelors."

Ralph Sanders snorted.

"When last we met," he said, "you were happily and suitably betrothed. To me also it was a happiness. I—I thought 'Youth is headstrong, but now all will be well.' Always you were a trouble to my mind. Always I felt you a sacred trust, for, you see, Jane, when your dear mother was dying she said to me, very soft and earnest, 'Ralph, we have not been step-brother and sister, you and I, but nearer and dearer than the brothers and sisters of one blood—and because of that you are to me, in my heart, as if the good God had given me a child, and when you are hurt I am hurt—' "

He ran his fingers through his thick gray hair, kicked the log violently, and concluded in a tone of wrath:

"We speak just now of your cousin—I can see

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she made you no happiness, but I can forgive her before I forgive the other woman who has spoiled your life and broken your betrothal—that Mrs. Rock Clif—”

“Clifford Rocks,” murmured Jane.

“What does it matter, her name? It is what she has done. To drag a child innocent, unknowing, into an affair of politics—do I say politics?—madness and a bit of publicity, sort of a scandal—it is this she has done to you, and I forgive her—never.”

“Yes, that’s just what the magistrate said,” replied Jane sweetly—“and Ralph, and the relations and every one.”

“Speak not to me of her—ever. As for your Cousin Mary—phaw—an old maid! Will you be one, too?”

Jane regarded him with a dangerous smile.

“Ralph, darling, you are quite out of date. You ought to know there aren’t any old maids now.”

“Yes, and I suppose no suffragettes?”

He hurled the question at her with violence.

“Absolutely no, since we have our vote.”

“The vote!” said Sanders very angrily. “It makes you very happy, that vote? It warms your heart? It is your companion, your support, that vote?”

“Ralph, said Jane steadily. “you—you are being a beast.”

Ralph Sanders ruffled his hair again, with both plump hands this time.

“Yes,—yes, my child; but it is because I care. One is not angry like that unless one cares. If I were the step-uncle who does not care I would



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shrug my shoulders and say:—"It is a pity, my niece, Jane Bainwright. She was betrothed to a fine young man—oh, some years ago, and now she obstinates herself to be a suffragette and to break windows with a hammer and in public places to cry aloud 'Votes for Women.' Sequel, she is arrested, she is in your police courts—what will you have? The betrothal is broken—' what does it matter to me. It is a pity, that is all."

Then, with a complete change of manner:

"Like that I cannot speak, Jane. I have a heart that is torn until I know how it is with you."

There was a silence. The ash dropped in the fire. The room, was nearly dark. Jane folded her papers, got up and began to light the lamps. With her back to Ralph Sanders, she said:

"Ralph, it's dear of you to care," Then with a noticeable effort—"It's all such ages ago; need we dig it up?"

"He—he is still alive?"

"Yes, he came back from the expedition all right."

"Do—do you see him, hear from him?"

There was a very noticeable silence, then the one word, "No," very low, and full of feeling.

Jane continued to busy herself adjusting the lamp shades, then turned, smiling:

"Ralph, you're a dear, but please do stop digging and come and be comfortable."

She altered the angle of the big chair, patted it invitingly and said:

"Let's talk about something real interesting for

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a change, you. You know you're ever so much nicer and more interesting than me. What have you been doing with yourself?"

Ralph Sanders sat down without speaking.

"Yes," he said, after a long pause, "let us speak about me, but it is not a comfortable thing to speak of,—this me."

Jane threw a big cushion on the floor and sat down on it cross-legged. The little room was full of warm glow. Yellow shades made the lamp-light golden. Ralph Sanders sat with the lamp at his elbow and behind him three windows showed a strip of sky still warmed by the last rays of the setting sun.

"See then, Jane, if I speak of you, if I tease you, if I am, as you say 'brute' to you, it is because—"

He broke off sharply, stared at her out of round blue eyes and then began again.

"There are two of me, Jane. There is the old uncle whom you call Ralph, kind and peaceable, a good citizen of the country, a man to be envied a man, as you say—comfortable. Then there is the other—he who is Sanders, chemist, inventor, man of science pure and simple. Up to now he, too, has been happy, as one is happy when he does the work which he loves beyond all the world. I say up to now, for now there has come upon this other me, this one who is Sanders the man of science—"

"Ralph, what it it?" said Jane.

Her breath came a little faster, her eyes widened. She looked at him with concern and great affection.

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"It is—I do not know how to call it—tragedy? Perhaps. A strain beyond what I can bear? Certainly. And this for weeks, Jane, until there is no Ralph any more, but only the tormented Sanders. But when I come here and speak of you and think of you—then I am Ralph again, just for a little. Oh, my dear, the relief! And you say, 'Ralph, let us talk of you and be comfortable'."

He had taken the same uncomfortable attitude as before—on the edge of the chair, leaning forward, one hand propping his head, and the other closing and unclosing on the back of the chair.

Jane rose to her knees and put her hand over his.

"Ralph, for goodness gracious sakes, what is it?"

He pushed her away from him gently. "I am telling you, but you must stay still. You asked me of my work. Have I invented, have I discovered? And it is as if you struck me upon a wound. And I say, 'Yes, I have worked, I have invented, I have discovered.' And, like a fool, I was happy. You are not an inventor, Jane; you do not know how one is plunged in it and lost to all else. One does not think 'What will I do with this?' One thinks only, 'This is mine, here no one has passed; I am the first.'"

He gave a sort of groan.

"It was like that with me. It was a gas that I have found, like nothing else, swift, sudden and deadly beyond what words can describe. Then when the discovery is complete, and I have made my experiments, I think, 'What to do?' I come

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out of that work dream so absorbing, and I begin to reason, 'My own country, she is netruel for ever. Thank God, she needs no poison gasses.' After my own country I think of England. With all my heart I love her, and with all my heart I believe that she loves peace. I think to myself, 'England shall have this secret.' And I write to your war office. All that—takes time. We write backward and forward, we have conversations. And you will understand I am not yet troubled. Then something happens, there come to me in three separate ways offers from other nations. I say 'No' to them. I will not correspond and will not talk. I say they are misinformed. They do not take my answer. First in small ways, and then in big, I am pressed. I cannot describe it; but I begin to feel 'What have I here? What forces are stirring? And can I resist them?' "

His voice sank to a whisper.

Jane stared at him, her face quite pale.

After a moment's pause he spoke again, a sudden energy in his voice.

"After that there began the spying. I cannot tell you. I came to think there were no honest people left. I will tell you of one. He was a refugee from Poland, a youth, violinist by profession, and he came to me with an introduction from one whose name I will not say, because it is a name much honored. He was sickly and penniless, and for the sake of that honored name I took him into my house, I got for him engagements, and in a week I find him in my laboratory at three in the morning, trying to open, with a false key, my desk. He is impudent beyond

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words. He says that all these machines of mine inspire his genius, that he has the wish to compose a 'Symphonie Chemique' music futuristic and explosive. I tell him that my machines are to inspire my genius, mine, and not that of chance-come musicians who violate the most sacred laws of hospitality. He departs. But he is only one. I am never safe, I am never free. I say to your war office that I will come over here, and they must make haste and complete our negotiations. And all the time my trouble becomes greater. I think; I see what it is that I have made, what a fearful thing in wicked hands. And I see how, all the wicked ones of the world, they will never rest until they have it, too. I begin to be torn, Jane; I begin to be torn. With all my heart I believe that England guards the peace of the world, and at one moment I think that with this weapon she can guard it safely. Next moment I think of all those others, those who wish for war, driven along terrible paths by what they call ambition. And I think that once this thing is loose in the world they will not rest until they have it, too. I shall have set the pattern, and they will work and work until they can follow it. And my dreams—my dear, Jane, my dreams?"

He shuddered violently and was silent.

Jane watched him with a little frown.

"Poor old Ralph," she said at last, "but if you feel like that why go on with it? Why not cut the whole thing out and invent some, nice beneficent sort of thing instead? You know, I don't think poison gas is in your line, I really and truly don't."

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Ralph Sanders threw out his hands with an impatient gesture.

"You sit there comfortably and tell me that! To you it is so easy. There is a formula written down, no more than half a sheet of paper, which will burn in five seconds; a match, a flame, a little white ash, and the devils that are plaguing me go back to hell and stay there. To you it seems like that?"

"Well, why not?" said Jane.

She had locked her arms about her knees, and was rocking gently to and fro. Her eyes were sorry for Ralph, who was in trouble, her vivid lips were pressed together in a smile that was just a little scornful.

"Yes, to you it is easy; but for me I am torn. I walk in a fog and cannot see my way, and in the fog are voices that always say a different thing. When I listen to one and am at the point when I will destroy everything because of the voice which says 'Destroy!' then comes another voice that says 'You have gone too far. You are pledged in your honor. To draw back now it is impossible.' And so it goes by day, by night I have no rest. But to you it seems easy—would you like to make such a decision, Jane? Would you find it easy then, do you think?"

Jane's lips parted on a quickened breath. Color flickered in her cheeks and then died again.

"See here," said Sanders.

He undid coat buttons, waistcoat buttons and appeared to be wrestling with some further complex fastening. In the end, and not without a struggle, he brought into view what appeared to

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be a cigarette case made of red lacquer, deeply carved.

"Look, Jane; look well, for in all the world there is not another like it. When I was young I went once to China and there a very strange thing happened to me, a thing that I tell to no one, ever. I bring away that secret memory and this case, and until now, my life has been so easy, so placid—like a dutch canal. And now, when a thing so terrible and tragic comes to me again, I put the secret of it here inside this case which comes to me from China."

He turned and with a quick movement flung back the fringe of the yellow silk which shaded the lamp, leaving half the little room fully illuminated.

"Now see, come close and see, Jane, whilst I show you what no one in all this world knows except myself. Look well, and remember; for if anything should happen to me, you will have need to remember."

Jane caught the arm of the chair, and pulled herself into a kneeling position. Ralph Sanders bent forward, the red lacquer case in his left hand and over his shoulder the lamplight fell upon it full, and Jane saw the pattern of raised roses and fishes with goggling eyes. Ralph was speaking in a quick, eager voice.

"Here in this case, is my secret, my formula; nowhere else, nowhere at all, excepting only in my brain. Now see, Jane, this is the secret of the case. You touch here and here, pressing, and, with the other hand touching this flower on one

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side and this on the other, you pull. Easy, is it not?"

The case slid into two halves, opening as a cardcase opens, but along an irregular line. Metal showed at the edges. From the larger half a piece of paper protruded. Ralph Sanders touched it with his forefinger lightly.

"Just a sheet of note paper," he said, "like this one." And he touched one of the papers from the pile on the floor.

"A mere sheet of paper on which appears some writing. But,—that formula is the secret of the mighty gas,—a gas sufficient to kill millions of men."

He shut the case. The irregular edges came together with just the faintest click.

Jane looked with all her eyes, but the opening had completely vanished.

"Clever, is it not? Now, do you remember what I have showed you? Take it, and let me see you open it!"

Timidly Jane took the case, held it as she had seen Ralph hold it, touched what she had seen him touch; and in a moment his strained gaze saw the tiny crack appear, widen—and Jane holding half of the case in either hand.

She looked up, smiling in triumph, and saw the sweat standing on his brow.

It seemed a long time before he said rather loudly:

"My dear, what a chance!" Then as Jane stared—"I only told you half. If you had put one of your fingers on the wrong place, if you had made any mistake at all, if you had tried to open



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it by force, there is a spring inside which would release enough acid to destroy that clever paper of mine. The acid is in a glass-lined compartment up here; and I said to myself, 'I will take the chance. If she makes a mistake, and the paper is destroyed, I will take it for an omen.' And—and you made no mistake."

Jane, kneeling upright before him, had been gazing first at the case and then at the face with its harassed altered look. But suddenly she looked past him over his shoulder at the three french windows a bare five feet away. They were black now, for the last of the glow of the setting sun was gone. The unshaded lamplight struck them full.

Jane looked and caught her breath.

There was a hand pressed against the glass of the left-hand window, a large hand that looked unnaturally white, the blood driven from it by the pressure of a man's weight upon it. The light showed the pale fingers—thick, long fingers—and the still paler palm crossed by a dark, jagged scar.

Just in the instant that Jane caught her breath the hand slipped on the glass. She heard the sharp sound of it on the wet pane, and screamed. Instantly the hand was gone. She heard the gravel grate under a heavy foot, and, as Ralph Sanders sprang up with a violent start, she screamed again.

## CHAPTER II

At eleven o'clock the same evening Ralph Sanders was writing a letter. The fire was dying down, but its bed of red-hot ashes glowed warmly. The three little windows on the farther side of the room were shut, hasped and securely curtained. Ralph Sanders held his writing pad upon his knee and wrote with a fountain pen. On the small table to his left, in full view, lay the lacquer case open.

He was alone. Jane had gone to bed. For a while he could hear her moving to and fro, and during that time he wrote at a furious speed, tearing off sheet after sheet and dropping them on the floor to his right. When the sounds ceased he stopped abruptly, his pen poised, his head a little on one side, listening. He remained like this for a long time, his face troubled, his free hand tapping restlessly on the arm of the chair. Once he took up the lacquer case,—drew out the folded paper which it contained, and then after a pause, during which he unfolded and refolded it several times, he put it back and pushed the case away from him sharply.

When he moved again it was to rise to his feet and gather up all those closely written pages. He crumpled them in one hand and dropped them on the red embers, where they smouldered for a moment, curling and blackening along their edges before they flared into flame. He watched the

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Thin black ash fly up, starred with sparks. He watched it settle and whiten. Then he turned back to the chair and wrote again very slowly.

Outside the wind was rising a little. As he paused between the labored sentences he could hear it, and the sound seemed to add to the trouble in his face. At last he put what he had written into an envelope, addressed it, and, taking from his waistcoat pocket a battered remnant of violet sealing wax, he sealed the flap of the envelope in three places, pressing down the hot wax with an old-fashioned seal which kept odd company with a cheap modern watch.

There were at least three violet stains upon Jane's lamp shade by the time he had finished, but at last the letter was well and truly sealed. He propped it against the stem of the lamp, and, for the last time, took up the crimson lacquer case.

When ten slow minutes had gone by he went to the hearth and raked the fire out carefully. Then, setting the outer door ajar, he extinguished the lamp, and stood by it for a moment, waiting until he could see his way. He did not wish to wake Jane by stumbling over a chair or running into a table.

As soon as the doorway showed its glimmer he passed through it, locked the door on the outside, and with a jerk pushed the key under the door.

The moon was shining and the wind was blowing. All the trees were moving, and their shadows, very black, made restless patterns upon Jane's flag-stone path and the dusty road beyond.

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Ralph Sanders went out of the little gate, and shut it carefully behind him.

He and Jane had gone for a stroll this afternoon, and now he followed the path which they had taken. After half a mile he left the road for a path that crossed a stretch of moorland. The moon was very bright. It made strange twisted things of what in the daylight had been dead heather and yellowing bracken. The wind blew salt in his face, and the long grating sound of a rough tide that ebbs upon shingle came to his ears. It grew louder. The path rose. There were no trees now, only this empty place under the moon and the double line where cliff met sea and sea met sky. A lowering bank of cloud stretched upward from the horizon and promised storm. No matter, since Ralph Sanders had been lighted to his destination.

Twenty yards to the left of the path there was a black hole in the ground. Here, where he was standing now, Jane had stood with him that afternoon.

"They call it Smuggler's Leap," she said. "Every one here believes that our great local smuggler, 'The Eagle' dived into it to escape from men who were hard after him. Anyhow, he was never seen or hear of again. Nothing that falls into Smuggler's Leap is ever recovered. Of course they say it's bottomless."

Ralph Sanders picked his way across the heather until he stood by the open mouth of the hole. Heather and gorse overhung it. A false step would be so easy.

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He stood looking down into impenetrable blackness.

A person who makes no noise is not necessarily asleep. Jane was not asleep. Instead of getting into bed she put on a warm dressing gown, turned out her lamp and curled up on the window seat to engage in the time-honored practice of gazing into the moonlight.

She could see three elm-bordered fields rising on a gentle slope—background. For middle distance Mrs. Nora Jackson's cottage across the road, with its untidy front garden. She hadn't even cut her lapins down, let alone her hollyhocks. Foreground—Jane's own neat plot with the row of standard roses on either side of the flag-stone path.

Jane began to think about Ralph. Horrid thing, that hand against the window. She knew just how it had happened. The abominable spying creature wanted to listen and wanted to see. It was absolutely brainless of me to leave those curtains open. If he stood on the path he might see, but he couldn't hear much, even though the middle window was a little open; and, of course, being an expert criminal, he wouldn't be such an idiot as to go and leave footprints on the border which I had just cleared and dug. I only wish he had. But, of course, if you're a mug at that sort of game you die young or return to prison. I expect he thought it an awful brain wave to lean across, with one hand on the glass, and his ear up against the window. I think I convinced Ralph when I actually showed him how it was done. And poor-splendid Ralph, holding a guttering

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candle all over me and my nice raked border, and looking dreadfully solemn and worried! Of course, the creature must have heard everything. But, as I told Ralph, he couldn't possibly have seen Ralph showing me the spring and me opening it. Thank goodness Ralph's nice humpy shoulder spoiled his little game as far as that was concerned. As I said to Ralph, the only thing he got away with was the quite useful information that if he did manage to pick Ralph's pocket—can you pick a vest-pocket, for I'm sure that's where he keeps it?—he couldn't open that case or even try to without flooding the whole show with acid—so that's that.

Jane nodded and went on looking at the moonlight.

Odd for Ralph to be so disturbed. Why couldn't he make up his mind one way or the other? A creature of quick, passionate impulses and swift decisions, she had never, in all her life, known what it was to hesitate before an emergency. If two ways lay before her, the question of which she should take would settle itself on the instant.

Ralph's talk had brought up the past very vividly. It was years and years and years since any one had spoken to her of her engagement to Walter Oakers. She remembered now how frightfully proud she had been of being engaged at seventeen. It was simply too thrilling to have a diamond ring and a man at your beck and call. And the rows—the excitement and fascination of them—Walter furious, Jane provoking and then a delightful scene of reconciliation. Jane frowned and smiled at the recollection. Then Mrs. Clifford

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Rocks—Jane's mouth twisted a little—the head-long, passionate worship with which she had flung herself at the feet of the famous leader was just a bitter taste to her now. She remembered Walter's 'and where do I come in?' Poor old Walter, she wasn't sorry for him then, but now it hurt to—to remember how he looked when she stamped her foot and flared back at him.

Yes, it hurts all right. Oh, bother Ralph for stirring it all up like this.

It was while she was bothering Ralph that Sanders so cautiously shut the front door and pushed the key under the sill. Jane, still dreaming of the past, heard nothing. The gate closed noiselessly. Even if she had been listening now, she would not have heard any footfall on the road where the dust lay three inches deep.

Jane went on thinking about Walter Oakers. Presently she dozed, and woke with a start. The wind beat against the window, full of rain. The night was black and as cold as death.

Jane got stiffly to her feet, groped in the darkness and lit a small bed-room lamp.

"Goodness, it's after three o'clock!" she said, as turning out the lamp, she stumbled into bed, and fell at once into a sound sleep.

### CHAPTER III

The clock had completed striking the hour of eight, and Jane, sitting up in bed rubbed her eyes, yawned, and said, "Good morning Clara—hurry and shut that window before I freeze."

Mrs. Brown shut the window and banged the door. Everything that could creak and rattle was doing so with great zest. There was a stinging wind and an unbelievably brilliant sun.

Jane detached her mind with a jerk from the prospect and bent her startled attention upon Mrs. Brown's steady stream of talk.

"What did you say?" she asked sharply, "and please, talk slowly."

"At half past seven," said Mrs. Brown without seeming to take a breath, "I knocked at the old gentleman's door like you told me to. And for five blessed minutes if I didn't go on knocking and a-standing there like a poor dumb wood-pecker which, if you'll remember, Miss Jane, it was only yesterday I told you that there was a tree damaged shameful up at Squire's and my nephew Joe's eldest son he vows and declares as the whole tribe of them did ought to be shot and done away with, only Squire he's fair mushy over birds and animals, and, as my niece Gertie's husband has often said, if we Christians got the half of it,—we'd be well off and no mistake. But I says to him, 'if you'd have known squire's father, you'd know as you was well off now, for



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a more ramping, rampageous old devil never cured a Christian family. No man's job wasn't safe, nor no woman's character, so to speak, not when old Squire was about.' And so I've told my niece Gertie's husband many's the time."

Here she drew breath and continued without the slightest change of voice.

"So there's the old gentleman's bed not slept in, and a letter for you a-propped against the lamp downstairs. So I suppose as how he's been called away sudden."

"What?" said Jane with a gasp. "What's that?"

"Just what I've been a-telling you all along," said Mrs. Brown with an air of virtue. "Sitting late at night means lying late in the morning, and a thing I never did hold with."

But Jane had leaped from bed and was halfway down the narrow cottage stairs.

Ralph gone! But how? Where? Ralph whom she had left quite fairly soothed and peaceful. Impossible!

She stood barefoot in her thin nightdress, and tore open the letter which bore her name. The wind whipped in through the open window, but Jane did not feel it. What on earth did it all mean? What on earth was Ralph up to?

She clutched the letter in one hand, the table with the other and read:

"Jane, my child, I am going away. This decision, it is too great for me; I cannot make it I am like a man who is blind; I cannot see which way I should go. But if I am blind, others have eyes. I think you have the eyes to see and the courage to choose. Choose, then, and God be

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with you. For me, I go. Good-by, little Jane,  
whom I love. Ralph

P. S. Jane dear, the red lacquer case, it is  
behind the second volume of Tennyson  
in the bookcase."

Jane found herself breathing very fast. The hand that held the letter was shaking. She was angry and she was afraid. With a rush of furious resentment she told herself that there was nothing to be afraid of. She turned the letter over, on the back was yet another postscript slanting right down across the page in an almost illegible scrawl:

"It is impossible that I can stay to meet him."

Jane crumpled the letter up, and flung it on the floor. Meet him? Meet whom? Had Ralph gone mad? Then in a faint whisper somewhere just beyond her control—had anything dreadful happened? She stamped her foot. Of—of course it hadn't—of course, it—what a perfect fool she was.

Turning she went across to the window and shut it. She stood with her hand on the hasp for a moment, looking out. It was the middle window which was open last night, and the man must have stood just there on the edge of the gravel path. A horrid shiver went all over her. If anything had happened to Ralph?

With a jerk she drew the curtains and ran over to the glass-fronted bookcase which flanked the fireplace. Kneeling on the brick, she flung the doors wide and dragged both Tennyson's volumes from their place on the lowest shelf. There was nothing behind them.

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Jane began to feel very cold. She pulled out other books to the right and left of the Tennyson volumes, and there was nothing behind them either. With stiff fingers she added other books to the pile on the floor, until at last the shelf was empty, and she gazed in horror at the empty shallow shelf.

Thinking there may have been some mistake, Jane set about removing the books from the other three shelves, but at last, the task finished, the shelves revealed nothing.

Mrs. Brown opened the door upon a scene of indescribable confusion.

Jane went over to the little table and picked up the letter, and the envelope. The latter she turned over and over. She had not broken the seals, but had opened it by tearing the top.

She went now to the window, drew back the curtain, and looked long and steadily at Ralph's three blobs of violet wax. The edges were sharper than they should have been.

Half turning, her eyes went quickly to the little writing table set at an angle between the door and window. A small paper knife, dagger-shaped and made of metal, lay on the blotting pad. She picked it up, brought it to the light and looked closely at it. A little smear of violet wax dimmed the blade. Some one had been here, then, after Ralph had written his letter and gone away, after she herself had gone to sleep. Some one had been here in the room, and had found the letter and opened it. Quite easy, especially if you heated it.

On the other side of the room Clara was thump-

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ing books back into place and grumbling all the time; nice Clara, with her flat back and flatter chest, and the frizzy fringe of a dead Victorian day. She could have kissed her for being so cross and safe and respectable.

What a perfectly horrid thing to have happened. The hand, large, pale and darkly scarred, rose up in Jane's memory. With a rush, the thing that she had been keeping at bay become a clamorous fact, impossible to resist.—Ralph's secret was stolen; the lacquer case was gone!

## CHAPTER IV

Major Oakers walked from the nearest station, Lairdale. Hastings, of course, hadn't one. A place with a name like that wouldn't have, as Jane had always insisted, much to Miss Mary Bainwright's annoyance.

Walter Oakers was not, however, thinking of either Jane or her cousin Mary. He had, in fact, not the slightest reason to connect Jane with Hastings. He was merely going to meet Ralph Sanders who refused point-blank to come to London.

As he walked he regarded the countryside with a critical eye, and decided that the stretch of moorland on the right would make quite a decent golf course.

He pursued the path of duty with considerable regret. It ended at a latched gate. He looked over it and saw very neat standard, rose trees, white and red alternately, on either side of a rain-washed flag-stone path. On the left of the front door there was a myrtle, and on the right a fuchsia stifly trained against the white-washed cottage wall. The front door was standing wide open.

Walter Oakers lifted the latch of the gate, walked up the path as far as the doorstep, and there remained rooted to the ground. He could see the recessed hearth. Before it lay a black wooly mat, and in the middle of the black wooly

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mat a girl was sitting. Her head was turned away, and she appeared to be staring into the fire.

The girl wore a slip-over sweater and skirt of dark blue, and her bobbed hair was the exact color of Jane Bainwright's hair, that rather bluish chestnut which is not so very common.

He stood looking down at the top of her head and wondered why on earth she did not turn around, since it was quite impossible that she should not have heard his footsteps.

Jane did not turn, because she had been trying not to cry, and she did not wish either the postman or some one from the village to see that her eyes were full of tears. She stared hard into the fire and winked vigorously. She also hoped that whoever it was would go away. And then she heard Walter Oaker's voice saying:

"I beg your pardon."

Jane was not conscious of jumping up. But in the same moment that she recognized Walter's voice she found herself on her feet, facing him and feeling exactly as if, somehow or other, she had walked into one of the more improbable kind of dreams.

Major Oakers, for his part, received the shock of his life. The girl's hair was not *like* Jane's it was Jane's. This was Jane herself, Jane from whom he had parted furiously years and years ago. Here, at this little cottage, he met Jane Bainwright, where he was expecting to meet a Swiss inventor!

He exclaimed, "Good Lord!" while Jane for her part, said simply, "How do you do, Walie?"

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exactly as if she had been expecting him all the time. When she had said that, she continued

"Won't you come in Walie?" And, of course, Walter Oakers came in.

Coming in rather intensified his embarrassment. For one thing his head very nearly touched the top of the cottage door, and he felt as if he had stepped into a doll's house.

Jane, on the other hand, felt immensely pleased with herself. Pleased and somewhat excited. Not only had she been able to wink away the tears which had been annoying her, but she had achieved a steady voice and a composed manner. This she felt to be highly creditable and the fact of Major Oaker's confusion ministered still further to her sense of having the situation well in hand.

Still smiling sweetly, she advanced a step and offered Walter her hand, which was very cold in spite of her excitement.

"Guess, we might as well say, 'Hello' properly," she said. "After—after all these years," she retorted, "it seems almost like ages, doesn't it."

"Yes, it does," replied Walter, and a rush of furious indignation surged up in him.

For many years after their affair, he had thought quite kindly of Jane, when he had thought of her at all. She was a little devil, of course, but, when all was said and done, he owed her something for having broken off their engagement. And now—the cheek of her, looking at him through her eye-lashes, eyes flashing, which he knew only too well meant mischief.

His voice was very stiff as he answered her.

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And then, quite suddenly, Jane blushed to the roots of her hair, and said, putting out both her hands, in despair.

"Oh, what's the use, Walter," she said, rather unevenly, "I'm so unhappy, Ralph's gone."

"Ralph? Gone?"

"Yes, Ralph and the lacquer case and the old burglar are all gone. And I don't know who's got it—the case I mean, not Ralph. But where he's gone I don't know. Oh—everything's so mixed up."

"That's the way it looks to me," said Walter slowly, "I'm awfully sorry, but I really don't understand."

He was on the point of adding, "You always did say I was slow," but checked himself with the feeling of having been on the brink of a precipice. Whatever happened, he must on no account encourage Jane. He knew from experience how very little encouragement she required, and, unfortunately, she was prettier than ever—much prettier.

"If you wouldn't mind explaining," he said.

"That's what I'm trying to do," said Jane, "but it would be much better if you'd sit down. You're such a long way up; it keeps me feeling as if I must shout, and then I lose the thread of what I'm trying to say."

Walter subsided into the most comfortable and sturdy looking chair in the room.

Jane took the other mate to his chair, and inquired:

"Let's see, where did I get to?"

"Why I don't really think you got anywhere."



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Perhaps you wouldn't mind beginning all over again."

"I did begin. I told you Ralph had gone, and the lacquer case; and I don't know who's got it. You see, it may be the burglar, the one with the horrid white hand, or one of the spies; or Ralph may have taken it himself, after all, and it's simply too harassing not to know which, because, of course, I'm responsible now—you do see that, don't you?"

Jane looked earnestly at him out of her dark gray eyes. Her cheeks were very pink.

Walter forgot about not encouraging her.

"I'm sorry, my dear child, but I haven't the foggiest idea what you're talking about," he said.

Jane was liking him better every moment. She had liked him when he turned brick-red and hadn't a word to say, and she liked him still better for forgetting all about the sad years that were gone.

The pink in her cheeks burned a little deeper. The feeling of being in a dream persisted.

Settling himself deeper in the chair, Walter turned so as to see her the better, and said:

"Now, my child, would you mind very much, if I ask you again to please begin at the beginning. The very beginning. Start by telling me who Ralph is and where he has gone to, and what he has to do with the lacquer case,—"

"I—I don't know—I only wish I did."

"Do you mean you don't know who he is, or you don't know where he's gone?"

"Why, of course, I know who he is!" she said quickly, "but I don't know where he's gone.

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Wallie, wake up, and I'll try to explain everything to you."

"Well, you'd be dizzy too, if you were me. I come here to meet Mr. Ralph Sanders, a Swiss inventor, and you tell me Ralph is gone—is Ralph the same as Mr. Ralph Sanders?"

"Why, of course!"

"An' he's been here?"

"Yes! Yes, of course, he's been here. That's what I've been trying to tell you. He was here last night, sitting in that very chair."

Suddenly a dreadful idea flashed into Walter's mind.

"Listen,—you're not—he isn't—I mean—that is—you're not married to him,—are you?"

Jane's eyes opened until they were perfectly round.

"My dear Wallie! What on earth are you talking about? Married? Ralph?"

Walter began to experience acute exasperation. Jane had developed a dimple and a giggle, and he was not sure which annoyed him more.

"Look here, be rational," he said. "I don't see anything to laugh at. If you're not married to him, you're not, that's all."

"Poor Ralph," said Jane, drying her eyes. "I can't think why you don't know all about him; but I suppose we were always too busy quarreling. Anyhow, I'm never very good at explaining Ralph; I'm always game to try, though. If you don't understand it'll be your fault. I warn you it's complicated."

She let her voice drop to a sort of sing-song, and recited with great rapidity; "My grand-

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mother was left a widow with a little girl of six, and she married Ralph's father, who was a widower, when Ralph was eight, and the little girl was my mother—I don't mean when she was six, but later; and she and Ralph were stepbrother and sister, and frightfully fond of each other, but no relation, and I've always called him uncle. That is to say," said Jane, slackening speed, "I call him Ralph, but I always talk of him to people as my uncle. It sounds more respectable, especially when he comes to stay with me alone. I say 'My uncle R. Sanders,' and then every one's quite happy."

Walter received this flood of intelligence without any alteration in the rather blank expression with which he had been contemplating Jane. His rugged features did not, in fact, lend themselves to much play of expression, and the effort to repress a just annoyance was having its usual stiffening effect.

"Now, to begin at the beginning," he said. "He was here last night?"

"Yes, that's what I'm trying to get you to understand," said Jane, aggrieved. "And then the hand came on the window, just as he was showing me how to open the lacquer case. And of course, that upset him a lot; and, goodness knows, he was quite enough upset before. But I did think I'd got him soothed down before I went to bed. And then, when I came down this morning, there was his letter propped up against the lamp, and he was gone."

Instantly Walter clutched at the letter, emerging like a point of solid rock from a whirlpool.

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"A letter? What was in it?" he said sharply.

Jane jumped up, ran to the writing table, rattled open a drawer, and come back with Ralph's letter in one hand and the envelope in the other. She thrust the letter at Walter, and stood watching as he read it, her color flickering and her breathing quickened. Walter read slowly, turned the page and at last—it seemed to Jane ages—looked up.

"He was bothered about this?"

Jane nodded.

"Yes, indeed," she said with something that was just not quite a sob.

"Then—why did he go on with it?"

"Of course I asked him that. And he said he couldn't see straight. He's most frightfully conscientious, and sometimes he thought it was his duty to go on, and sometimes he didn't and he couldn't sleep."

Jane's gaze was rather piteous now. It searched Walter's face, seeking for reassurance.

Walter realized this quite suddenly, and found himself saying: "He's all right, you know; he's bound to be all right. There's nothing to worry about."

"You're sure?" The words were just breathed.

This was a Jane he did not know, a little soft thing who wanted comforting, not the Jane who provoked and resisted.

"Yes, of course," said Walter, rather loud.

Jane pushed the envelope into his hand.

"You see, its been opened," she said. "Here, under the seals with a hot blade. Whoever did it used my paper knife; the wax has marked it."

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Walter whistled.

"Yes, it's been opened," he said. "Who did that?"

"It might have been Ralph," said Jane, "but I don't think so. I expect it was the person with the hand."

"What person? Everybody has hands!"

"The hand. The hand on the window. I go on telling you about it."

"Well, it hadn't got there yet," said Walter.

"It was just after Ralph had been telling me how absolutely distracted he was, and all about the horrible thing he had invented. He pulled the red lacquer case out of where he'd kept it in his secret pocket in his vest, and told me the formula was inside; and then he showed me how to open it. No, sit back a little more. Now you're Ralph. Put your elbow on the arm of the chair just here—no, your shoulder's too high; flatten it down a little. And I'm kneeling like this with the case in my hand. Now can you screw your head round without changing any of the rest of you, right round until you can see the window? That's it. Right in the middle of the left hand window, quite suddenly, there was a hand, a perfectly horrible hand with a scar. I mean I saw it suddenly. Some one must have been leaning across to look in and to hear what we were saying. Well, he must have heard every word, but he couldn't possibly have seen anything, that's what I want you to get quite clear. He heard Ralph tell me that the formula was in the case, but he couldn't see Ralph open it to show me how. And he heard Ralph tell me, if

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any one meddled with the case or tried to force it, or even made a mistake in opening it, that a spring would let out enough acid to destroy the formula."

"Well, you saw the hand. And then what happened?"

"Oh, I screamed," said Jane, "like a railway whistle, the very loudest sort. And we heard someone running away. And then I screamed again. And by the time Ralph and I got into the garden there was no one there."

Walter took up Ralph Sander's letter and read it again.

"He wrote this afterward?"

"Yes."

"And the case—the red lacquer case?"

"Gone," said Jane—"I told you that the very first thing."

Walter got up and went to the bookcase.

"Oh, it's positively gone, I've had all the books out," said Jane, sitting on her heels to watch him.

It was, of course, exactly like Walter to take them all out again. He shook each one carefully, and unlike Jane, when he finished he put them all back.

He turned to find Jane on her feet, frowning, but he brushed past her and went to the middle window.

Jane considered that he filled the room up dreadfully, and that he was even more obstinate than he used to be.

"I told you it was gone," she said, but Walter was not listening.

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"This window has been opened from the outside," he remarked. "Those catches wouldn't bother a child. Some one has slipped a thin knife in here and pushed the catch back; you can see where the paint is scratched. The question is, when did Ralph Sanders go out?"

"I—I was sitting at my window till three, but I think I did go to sleep—I'm not sure. Anyhow, he had locked the door and slipped the key under the sill; and Mrs. Brown found it there but she can't remember anything about the windows, for I asked her. I suppose"—very sweetly—"that you would like to ask her all over again."

Walter shook his head.

"No, I'm going back to the station," he said. "The first thing to do is to find Sanders. If he went by train, then I know where he went to. You see it's just possible that he changed his mind and came back for the case himself."

"That may be," said Jane, musingly, "but then he wouldn't have left the letter."

## CHAPTER V

The feminine occupation of waiting at home while the man goes out and does things was one which had never commended itself to Jane Bainwright. As Walter had, however, refused point-blank her offer to walk with him to the station, pointing out with unanswerable truth that he could walk three times as fast without her, Jane had been forced to accept the situation. She reflected that men were the most uncomfortable creatures in the world. Take Walter, for instance. When he was here he filled up the room and ignored you and rode rough shod over what you wanted to do. And when he was gone, and anyone would think you'd be thankful to have a breathing space, you felt limp and lonely and left behind. That was a man all over; horribly in the way when you'd got him and horribly out of it when you hadn't. Oh bother all men, and bother double, Walter.

The time went oh, so slowly.

Mrs. Brown came in and asked; "What about luncheon, if you please, Miss Jane?" and Jane bit her head off, and then, conscience-smitten, penetrated into the kitchen to apologize.

Clara was soothed and lunch spoiled by the time that Walter returned. And, even as Jane ran to the gate and lifted the latch with shaky fingers, she knew that he had no good news for her.



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"Well, he hasn't gone by train," he said. "They've telephoned all the stations which he could possibly have reached, and they're quite sure that no one in the least like him had boarded any train from eleven last night up to the present."

"But, Walter, I didn't give you a description."

"I know you didn't. There was no need to, I've been twice to Switzerland to see him. Say, didn't he tell you?"

Jane shook her head. How extraordinarily deceitful of Ralph! So this was why he had started digging things up last night.

"No, he didn't say a word." This with sudden energy, and then in tones as nearly ice as possible, "why should he?"

Walter, it is to be feared, was not attending to her social attempts. He ate a hasty lunch and Jane a very perfunctory one. Jane's efforts at conversation fell into bogs of silence and drowned there. They were both glad when lunch was over.

As soon as they were alone Walter recovered his powers of speech.

"Look here, I've been figuring it out," he said, "but I didn't want to talk about it till you'd had something to eat. Women always think they can go on without anything to eat when things are happening and that's just the exact time you want about double." He frowned gloomily at her and added: "You don't eat enough to keep a kitten alive."

"I like that, kittens eat too much," said Jane. "But what does it matter. If you were going

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to say something, for goodness' sake say it."

"Well, I was thinking," said Walter, "if he didn't go by train he may be somewhere in the neighborhood still. He didn't hire a car or buggy, either that I can discover. I've been keeping the telephone pretty busy and he's a noticeable sort of person — foreign accent and so on—"

He broke off and seemed a little uncertain how to proceed. Finally he said:

"Did he know the neighborhood at all? Ever been here before?"

"No," said Jane.

"Did he have any friends within reach?"

Jane looked at Walter and looked away. She shook her head slowly.

"No," she said in a low voice, "he didn't know any one. He only arrived at lunch time yesterday, and in the afternoon I took him for a walk, and in the evening everything began to — happen."

"You took him for a walk? Where?" inquired Walter.

"Oh, just along the road, and over the moor to the Smuggler's Leap," said Jane, and on the last word her voice wavered suddenly, and she caught at Walter's arm and shook it.

"No! — No! —" she cried, passionately.

"No! of course not!"

It was plain enough that the thought which so vehemently repelled Jane was one which also weighed on him.

"Oh, I hate you!" she cried, and swung round to hide eyes in which anger was suddenly

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drowned. The certainty that Walter was being sorry for her slid forlornly into her consciousness. How dared he be sorry when there was nothing the matter? How dared he speak in that kind, hesitating way?

"I didn't mean that — No, Jane, do listen to me. I'm really only trying to help you — but he might have gone out for a walk to clear his thoughts and if he didn't know the neighborhood he would most likely have taken the one path he did know and might have lost his way, or fallen down somewhere — something like that — I don't mean anything serious. I thought perhaps I'd go and have a look at the place — just stroll up there, you know."

"Not alone?" There was a faint relenting in her voice.

Walter continued to hesitate.

"Well — I rather thought — it's quicker, you know."

"I'm coming with you," said Jane. "I simply won't stay here by myself, not if you talk forever. You don't know what it's like — just waiting."

As she spoke she had opened the door, and after calling down the passage, "Clara, we're going out," she ran up stairs, and was back in an astonishingly short time with a gray wooly coat, a little gray beret, and a bright scarf.

"I'm ready," she announced, rather breathlessly, and they went out together.

Walter and Jane turned up onto the moor. The sky rose about it, very blue, very full of light, absolutely cloudless. On either side of the path

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the scorched heather faded from amethyst to brown, and, the hollow places of the moor where the bracken grew thickest looked as if they were full of a pale fairy gold. The keen air, the sun, the clear light that bathed everything made their cheering way into Jane's mind and drove the shadows out of it. Walter might be kind to her now if he liked; she would not mind; she might even be kind to him.

They had walked in silence until they left the road, but with the sudden change in Jane's mood the silence broke and Walter was asking her:

"Jane, how long you been here? All the time?"

"Oh, my goodness, no," her eyes were wide with dismay. "Two years in Hastings has been about enough."

"Well," said Walter in what Jane called his nice voice. "I thought it sounded rather lonely, and I was wondering whether you'd been able to keep up with your friends, or whether you'd made new ones, or — what."

Jane looked at him through her eyelashes. He was really taking an interest, she decided, really being nice and friendly. An impulse moved her to frankness.

"When you say old friends, what exactly do you mean, Walter?" she asked quite simply.

"Well, I suppose I meant Mrs. Clifford Rock," said Walter evenly.

Jane gave a little slow nod.

"Umm! I thought you did. I never see her now —" A pause. "I haven't seen her or heard from her for years. As for the others, I haven't much in common with them. The only one I

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ever see is Frances Lane. Do you remember her? She used to be rather pretty. I do see her sometimes, but it isn't exactly a feast of reason and a flow of soul. She's gone crazy about a new society she's taken up with. They call themselves 'The Free Party,' and she bombards me with tracts about it. I went to one of their meetings and I thought some of them looked a pretty — shady lot. But all Frances' geese are swans. She's that sort, you know; like I used to be, only with Frances it's chronic."

"And you've — you've got over it?"

"Yes," said Jane. "I've lost all the fresh enthusiasm of youth."

She looked soulfully at Walter as she made this statement, but there was a dimple at the corner of her mouth. Walter remembered Jane's dimple of old. It usually meant deviltry, but he was amazingly glad to see it again.

"Walter, I'm old and disillusioned and very, very good now," said Jane solemnly. "I belong to a village institute and go to church bazaar's. I used to read sermons aloud to Cousin Mary in the evenings. I know quite a lot of theology."

Her limped gaze continued to rest upon Walter and the dimple flickered in and out.

"It's been very, very dull," she said, "and that's why I'm talking to you like this. You've no idea how nice it is to talk to some one who knows the very worst about me. You couldn't possibly think worse of me than you do, so there are no appearances to keep up. It's awfully restful," concluded Jane.

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"Do I think badly of you?" said Walter rather seriously.

"Well, you said so — that last time, years ago."

"Isn't there a statute of limitations?"

"Not for that sort of thing and not with you. You're the world-without-end kind. If you make up your mind about a thing it stays made up. Whereas mine —" Jane smiled her sudden, brilliant smile.

"Yes, — what about yours?"

"Mine isn't so monotonous," said Jane. "It is fresh and various and — and open-minded. I should simply hate to have a mind like a war-office sealed bid. If I hate a person one minute it's quite on the cards that I may be loving him like anything in a little while." And then and there Jane stopped short and blushed scarlet.

"You said you hated me," said Walter.

"That," said Jane, recovering herself, "was a figure of speech."

They had come up over the top of the rise, and for a moment they stood looking out to the edge of the cliff and the dazzling line of sea beyond.

"Is this the place?"

Walter's voice had not changed, but the atmosphere had. In spite of the flooding sunshine, coldness and shadow seemed to sweep between them.

"Is this the place?" he repeated.

Jane pointed. All her flow of words dried up.

"Over there," she said and led the way across the heather.

They came to the black hole in the hill. It

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had been black at midnight. It was black in the daylight. Fuzz overhung it on crooked twisted stems and the heather huddled about it's rim.

Jane stood quite still, looking down. The silence held her, and, as she stared down into the darkness, the color slowly drained away from her face. She was afraid — oh, she was very much afraid of this place, but it had nothing to do with Ralph, it could not possibly have anything to do with Ralph.

As she stood there she was vaguely aware of Walter moving to and fro, now stooping down, now rising and walking on a pace or two; but the impression made by these movements of his remained, as it were, upon the surface of her mind.—Within were fear and the shadow and her desperate struggle against them. It shook her, but she resisted. She was still resisting when an exclamation from Walter startled the surface of her mind into attention. She looked at him, and saw him rise from his knees with something in his hand.

It was a fountain pen; Walter had it in his hand. There was distress on his face. He came toward her quickly.

"It's a Swiss make. Did he drop it yesterday afternoon?"

"No," said Jane. "I saw it during the evening. He was writing with it. Yes, — that's — his pen."

The short sentences came stiffly from her lips. The struggle within had grown sharper. She wanted to stop struggling, but she mustn't.

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"I'm afraid —" said Walter in a low, unhappy voice.

Quite suddenly the struggle was over.

"It isn't true, and I'll never believe it!" she cried.

She caught at Walter with both hands and burst into tears.



## CHAPTER VI

During the week that followed those who knew of Ralph Sanders' disappearance became tolerably well convinced that it was a final disappearance, and that whether it had been effected by his own determination or by some outside agency the chances were that he and his secret lay somewhere in the depths of the Smuggler's Leap.

Jane continued to say that it was not true and that she did not believe it. She said it to Walter and she said it to Detective-Inspector Swimerton, who came down in plain clothes from New Scotland Yard. Walter said nothing at all. And the inspector said, "Yes, yes," in a perfunctory sort of way, and went on asking her questions, more questions than she could have imagined that any one could possibly think of.

With singular unanimity the press ignored Ralph Sanders and his disappearance, but in Hastings interest ran high, and tongues ranged unchecked.

It watched Jane with intense interest, and wondered when she would go into mourning, and whether she would wear out the black which she had bought for Miss Mary which must still be quite good, or wastefully purchase something new.

On the Saturday of that rather long week Major Oakers walked into the cottage, and sat down with rather a purposeful air. He did shake hands

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with Jane, but it was a very incidental handshake.

"No, there's no news," he said, "but I want to talk to you Jane. Is the door shut? And is that Brown woman really out of the way? I suppose you know that she tells her relations in the village everything that has and that hasn't happened, and as the entire population appears to be related to her in one way or another, we are rather as you might say, living in the open."

"Yes, I suppose it's that dried-up inspector who's been setting you against her?" said Jane hotly. "I hated him the minute I saw him. I simply couldn't do without Clara, and it isn't her fault if she's got a lot of relations. I am sure they're not things any one would choose to have a lot of if they could possibly help it. I think Clara must be an angel not to quarrel with them. I know I always quarrel with mine."

"Yes, I know you do. But then you're rather good at quarreling, aren't you?" said Walter. He said it with a trace of a smile, but his eyes dwelt rather sternly on Jane, or she thought so. Her color rose brightly.

"Oh, am I?" she said, "Well — I suppose you ought to know whether I did it well or not. Did I? I like things done well, if I do them at all."

"I haven't time for old quarrels," said Walter shortly.

He was very sorry for Jane and he wanted to help her, but if she imagined that he was going to dangle about and be flirted with she would find herself mistaken.

"I've come down on business, serious business, and I want to get on with it."

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Jane folded her hands.

"Well, — I've been waiting for you to begin," she said rather sharply.

Major Oakers pulled a copy of the Times out of his pocket.

"This is the first thing," he said. "Do you know anything about it?"

He held out the folded paper. She leaned forward and read in the Personal column, just above his large thumb, "From Jane to Ralph: Please, please write. Dreadfully unhappy and anxious."

"Oh," said Jane.

The sparkle of anger was gone from her eyes; they looked in frank bewilderment from the paper to Walter and back again to the paper.

"Who — who put that in?" she asked sharply.

"That's what I've come to ask you. If you didn't, we don't know who did."

"Me? Certainly not! But it's a very good idea; sorry I can't say it's my idea."

Walter took the paper from her.

"The notice was sent to the newspaper office with one of your cards inclosed," he continued.

He produced a card and held it out.

"If I'm not mistaken that's one of your cards."

Jane gazed at the card, and nodded.

"Why — yes, that's one of my — but how on earth, and why?"

"Well," said Walter, "some one hopes to get information of Ralph Sanders whereabouts through you. That's tolerably certain, I think. You didn't advertise, so they've done it for you. They hope he'll write to you. And with your Mrs.

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Brown in the house, the rest is easy sailing for them."

"She's perfectly loyal."

"She may be loyal, but she talks. My dear girl, her motives may be excellent, but her tongue is a yard and a half too long. Don't get angry, or at any rate not for a minute or two. There's something else I want to talk to you about."

"Business first and pleasure afterward," said Jane. Then she laughed and leaned back in her chair. — "All right go on with your questioning."

"Well," said Walter. Then he stopped, got up, and went and stood in front of the fire. "It's this way. My official connection with this affair is — well, in fact, it's over. You know the conclusion that Swimerton came to. He's a very able fellow and, and — well, that was the conclusion he came to. I know you don't share it. And, of course, I don't want for a moment to urge on you any point of view that would — that would, in fact, distress you. But I think it's only fair to say that my own personal view coincides with his and that the war office accepts it. In fact, we don't think there's anything more to be done. The attempt to drag the water at the bottom of the Smuggler's Leap failed, as you know. But there it is. As far as Ralph Sanders personally is concerned, we don't think there's anything more to be done."

"Yes," said Jane in a very little voice.

Her hands were holding each other tightly.

As regards his invention, we incline to think that he took the secret with him. We have had a man over at Bern and he reports that before leaving home Ralph Sanders burned a good many papers

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and destroyed all the materials with which he had been experimenting."

"That would be because of the spies," said Jane with definite decision.

"It — it rather points to premeditation."

"Well it points to spies," said Jane.

His half-unwilling admiration for the pluck with which she defied probabilities rose a point or two as he watched her steady eyes and little, shaking hands. After all, there was something about Jane, even in her most exasperating moods. It was something that made it rather hard to keep one's head and be calm and judicial. With one side of him Walter desired very much to be cool and detached — in fact, to stick to the point. Another side of him yearned to comfort. Jane, envisaged ways of comforting her and was, in fact, in some danger of forgetting how fortunate a thing it was that he and Jane had escaped marrying each other.

He went on speaking.

"It's possible, of course, that the case has been stolen; the bogus advertisement points to something of the sort; but, of course, that's not really in my line at all. That's a job for Scotland Yard, and we've asked them to keep a sharp lookout. So you see my business here is over" — he waited a moment and then added, "my official business."

A dreadful wave of forlornness flowed in upon Jane. Walter was the sort of person who made you feel as if he would always be there, angry and disapproving, perhaps, but so — blessedly safe.

Her eyes widened suddenly like those of a startled child, and the forlornness showed in them as she said with a little gasp:

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"You're going away — and not coming back?"

"Do you want me to come back, Jane?" said Walter, watching her.

Jane was silent. Pride and independence urged her to intimate to Walter that his coming and his going were alike matters of perfect indifference to her. On the other hand, something did so ache at her heart, and that something made her want to put out both hands to him and say: "Oh, Walter be friends again and stay, please."

So Jane was silent, and, after a moment Walter went on more slowly.

"What's the good of beating about the bush?" he said, "If we had met for the first time a week ago, it would all be different; but as it is I want to know where we are. I seem to have a knack of annoying you — we never have been able to steer clear of quarreling — and so —" Walter struck.

After a long pause, during which Jane sat with her chin in her hands and her eyes fixed on the black woolly mat in front of the fire, he made another effort.

"You see, it's this way. Up to now I have had an official connection with your affairs — that is, as far as Ralph Sanders' disappearance was concerned. Now that's over. If I go on coming down here it would be on my own — as a friend; and I don't know whether you want me or not. Once," said Walter rather gruffly, "you told me not to butt in on your affairs — that you liked managing them yourself, in your own way — and — well, it's not the sort of thing one wants to hear a second time."

"Did — did I say that?" said Jane's smallest

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voice. "How rude! Why did — did I say it? Were you trying to — to manage me, Wallie?"

"I expect so. And we weren't bothering about being polite to each other just then."

"No?" said Jane. Her eyelashes just flickered up and down again. "No — I remember you called me a vixen, and a hoyden and a littly fury. Our manners are much nicer now," she concluded with an air of virtue.

Walter found himself watching to see if the dimple would appear. With an effort he looked out of the window. If he went on looking at Jane, goodness knew what might happen. It was much safer to look away and go on talking.

"Oh, but what's the good of raking things up?" he said impatiently. "It's the present, not the past, that concerns us. Am I to leave you to manage for yourself or do you want my help? That's what it comes to. It's — it's up to you, Jane."

Jane stole a glance at his profile; "nubbly but — but nice," she reflected. Then she contemplated the mat again and maintained a maddening silence. Walter turned at last with a jerk.

"My dear girl, I — I wish you'd say something." And at that Jane looked up, smiling.

"Just what do you want me to say?" she said.

"Exactly what you think," said Walter.

"Shall I, really tell you the truth?"

"Yes, Jane, please."

"But, one hardly ever does — not really. But I will if you insist. After all, as I said the other day, you can't think much worse of me than you do, so what does it matter? What I feel at present is that everything is slipping — like being in the

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middle of a landslide, with a — perfectly horrible no-one-knows-what's-going-to-happen-next sort of feeling about it. And — and you are something solid to — take hold of —”

Walter put out his hand. It met Jane's and found it very cold and — small.

“All right, Jane, I'm here. Hold on tight, my dear girl,” he said.

Jane blinked rapidly three times, and jumped up.

“Gosh, but I'm an idiot,” she said, stamping her small foot and pulling her hand out of Walter's — just in time, for, even as she did it, Mrs. Brown came in with the tea.



## CHAPTER VII

After a Sunday of the most blameless description Jane felt at peace with the world and in an angelic state of conscience rather unusual for her. Walter and she had parted friends, "for about the first time ever" — as Jane put it; she had sat through a sermon without going to sleep; and on Sunday afternoon had spent an hour and a half reading aloud to Mrs. Fimloor's bedridden mother. What she had not bargained for was finding the cottage filled with a nice selection of Clara's relations. Gertie Fimloor was, of course, to be expected — and endured. She was a person of many mournful disapprovals which clung like a mist and always made Jane feel limp. The cottage was not really big enough for them all. In fact, Jane had for a moment hesitated upon the doorstep when she heard their voices, and was only kept upon the path of virtue by the conviction that if they had seen her come up to the door, they would certainly see her go away from it.

As she hesitated for that mere moment, and just before she raised her hand to the knocker, she heard Mrs. Fimloor say in her deep, carrying voice:

"No, not to say foreign, she wasn't, Frances, and wonderful interested."

"Goodness!" said Frances, and, as Jane knocked, there was a loud "Ssh!" from Clara.

Mrs. Fimloor's mother was so glad to see her that Jane did not regret having clung to the path

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of duty. She considered that she had earned the comfortable feeling with which she encountered Monday morning.

She came downstairs; had breakfast; waited for the postman; read a dull letter from Cousin Mary's solicitor; picked up the Times, and there was the bomb-shell staring her in the face from the Personal column. Jane stared back, and felt her heart pound against her side.

Friday's advertisement, the sham advertisement, had elicited a prompt reply. There was no mistaking it.

"R. S. to Jane: Don't worry. Messenger will meet you Hastings — Benton road eleven-thirty today. Absolute discretion."

Jane jumped up and looked at the clock. It was nearly ten thirty. Her eyes went back to the paper. Everything seemed to be shaking a little, but she steadied herself and read the message again. It was from Ralph. There was no doubt about it. That meant Ralph was alive. She had always felt that he was alive. Walter didn't believe it. Now he would have to believe it. Would he?

Just the faintest little shiver of doubt came into Jane's excited mind like a little draft penetrating into an overheated room. If Walter were here what would he say? He might say — Jane frowned, but her mind was clearing — he might say, if one advertisement was bogus, why not the other? He might say that.

Jane crumpled up the paper and let it fall onto the floor.

If Walter were here he would probably say any number of stuffy, prudent things; but he wasn't

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here, and she was certainly going to walk along the Hastings road and meet the messenger who might have news of Ralph.

She ran upstairs for her hat and the bright colored scarf, and hurried out. As she unlatched the gate she heard a man's voice answering Mrs. Brown, and wondered vaguely why Clara was in the garden gossiping. She went on down the road.

The person with whom Mrs. Brown was conversing was Charley Fimloor, who combined the duties of village postman with those of obedient husband to Mrs. Brown's cousin. Having left the letters half an hour before, he had returned at the moment when Jane was coming downstairs, thus missing her.

While she was considering who on earth was talking to Clara he was explaining at great length, and with much detail, how it had come about that having a telegram as well as a letter to deliver to Miss Jane, he had entirely forgotten all about the telegram until well upon his homeward way. He was a little, rosy man, and it amused him very much to think that he had remembered the letter and forgotten the telegram. He and Mrs. Brown laughed together for some time before she thought of going to see where Jane was. To do her justice, however, it must be stated that she already knew the contents of the telegram, having elicited from Mr. Fimloor that it did not contain bad news. "Something about an appointment," he explained, "nothing to signify, so to speak. But, perhaps, you'd better just give it to her, Clara, and — yes, if you are making a cup of tea, I don't say as I should not be glad of one."

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But Jane was well away down the road, and Walter Oakers telegram, "On no account keep appointment," failed to fulfill its purpose.

Jane walked along the road. A slight feeling of exhilaration, a sense of escape, quickened her steps. There was no one to interfere, no one to stop her, but she hurried as though some one might try.

At eleven thirty Jane was nearly two miles from Hastings and beginning to be bored. The sort of things that Walter would be likely to say began to come into her mind. Half a dozen drops of rain fell and there was a pebble in her shoe. She sat down upon a tree stump, took off her shoe and shook it out, and was just making up her mind to sit down and wait for the messenger instead of walking any further, when a distant roaring sound made her look round and, far down the long, white road a car came into sight. It was traveling fast, and as it drew near she saw that it was a two-seater machine, and it was being driven by a woman.

It slowed down, stopped and the driver leaned over the side, asking, "Can you tell me, please, how far I am from Hastings?"

Jane got up and came forward. Her boredom was gone. She looked hard at the woman and saw very little — a black felt hat crammed low over the eyes, a nondescript tweed coat whose collar hid the chin, and fold upon fold of a silk scarf, on her hands, coarse pig-skin driving gloves.

As she came up to the car the woman spoke again.

"Tell me, do you happen to be Miss Bainwright?" and, as Jane nodded, the driver of the

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car continued, "I'm glad you came, it was short notice, I admit, but I wanted you, and no one else."

"Well, I'm here," said Jane. "May I ask to whom I am speaking?"

"A friend," smiled the woman.

"Of — of my uncle's?"

"Certainly, and of yours."

The voice puzzled Jane. It was low, rather muffled, perhaps by the scarf, and singularly lacking in vibration. She received the impression that it was being used a good deal below its natural pitch. She began to feel at once excited and irritated. The child in her — and there was a great deal of the child in Jane — thrilled to the secrecy, the lonely meeting; but something else, just as much a part of her, something that stood for intelligence and experience, was repelled and very much on the alert.

With her hands behind her, leaning on her stout ash stick, she stood about a yard from the car, and asked.

"Have you a message for me?"

"I have," said the woman. She had not a foreign accent, but each time she spoke her "r" was not quite the slovenly English "r". Her words were pronounced, they did not just slide one into the other.

"Then will you kindly give it to me," said Jane. "I must hurry back."

"It's a message from your uncle. No, I have not seen him: it would not be safe. Above all things it is necessary that we should not be connected, but he has sent me a message. Even that was a

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risk, but he could not bear to think that you were grieving, and besides there was the case."

"The case? What case?" Jane's tone was cool and detached, but the hands that rested on the crook of the walking stick pressed it hard.

After this there was a brief silence.

"The red lacquer case," said the woman. "You know, he told you; he showed you how to open it, and in his letter — "

"Yes, in his letter?"

"He said in the letter he was leaving it in the bookcase, but after all — "

"Yes?" For the life of her Jane could not keep the words steady.

"At the last moment he took it with him: — you must have guessed that," said the woman coolly, "didn't you?"

"Well, perhaps. What about it?" said Jane.

The woman looked back along the empty stretch of dusty road before she answered. Then she leaned a little farther over the side of the car.

"He took it, but of course he couldn't keep it, it — it wasn't safe. He passed it to me," and now she spoke low and rapidly. "Now he wishes that the case should be opened, and the paper sent through the post — that is the safest of all — to an address which he has given me."

Jane remained silent for some moments, her eyes fixed on the blue scarf of the driver of the car. Behind it there were eyes that would not show themselves, lips which she could see moving, but whose expression was withheld from her. She spoke at last in simple, puzzled tones.

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"Well—if he wants it opened, he can certainly open it."

The clumsy, gray tweed coat did not quite conceal a very slight shrug of the shoulders.

"Certainly, but he has not got the case. How can he open it? He has passed it to me, and his message is this: 'Tell Jane she is to open the case and give you the paper. Then I am safe.' "

As if from far off, there came into Jane's mind two apparently unconnected sentences. One, 'Her tongue's about a yard and a half too long.' That was what Wallie had said about Clara Brown. And the other: 'Not to say foreign she wasn't, and wonderful interested.' That was Mrs. Fimloor's—about—?

With the sound of the careful "r's" still in her ears Jane wondered whether Mrs. Fimloor had heard them too. She remembered Clara had said "Ssh!"

When she replied, Jane was astonished at her voice, it sounded strange to her, a voice that was louder than it needed to be.

"I presume you have a written message from my uncle?"

The driver of the car tapped impatiently on the car door.

"I tell you, even a message by word of mouth, even that, is a risk—and you say; 'has he written?' "

"But why should there be any risk?" said Jane.

The gloved hand drummed impatiently on the door.

"Do you—do you doubt that I come from him?" asked the woman. "Is that it?"

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Jane smiled. She was pleased to find that she could smile.

"Oh, no," she said softly.

Walter would have thought her tone too sweet. He had reason to beware of Jane when she spoke sweetly and raised her limped eyes. The woman looked behind her again.

"We must waste no time," she said. "If you will open the case, I will take you at once to the place where it is. Believe me, if you wish to help your uncle there is great need for hurry."

Jane stopped leaning on her stick and stood up straight.

"If there is anything that my uncle wishes me to do I will do it—when I have his written authorization,—and not before. And now I must leave you, as it's time I was on the way back home."

There was a little electric pause before the woman said: "Can you not understand? I tell you there is danger. I tell you there is need for great haste; and you talk to me of a written authorization."

"I'm sorry," said Jane, "but I can't do anything without it."

She smiled again, adjusted her scarf, threw a good-by over her shoulder and began to walk briskly in the direction of Hastings. Her heart was beating a good deal faster than usual, but her uncertainty had completely vanished. Like a little white-hot flame there burned in her the conviction that the woman was lying, that she did not come from Ralph at all; so she stuck her chin in the air and walked away, and with a soft purring noise the car came after her and drew along side.



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"You do not care," said the woman, pleadingly, "how much you injure him, your uncle? You will not move a finger to help him when he begs for help? I am to go back and say 'Jane washes her hands of you, she will not help you,' I am to say that?"

Jane turned her face toward the car for a moment. Her brows were arched over scornful eyes. Her color was high.

"You can go back and say truthfully, 'Jane isn't a fool,'" she said, and with a nod she turned, scrambled up the bank on her right, squeezed through a gap in the hawthorn hedge that topped it, and, with a parting wave of the hand, struck out across the fields, a short route home.

## CHAPTER VIII

At the cottage Jane found Walter's telegram, "On no account keep appointment." To persons of Jane's turn of mind it is very pleasing to find that you have done a thing which somebody forbids your doing.

Immediately she wrote Major Oakers, giving a faithful account of the forbidden interview, but she did not tell him his telegram had not reached her hands until after the interview had taken place. If Walter supposed that just because they were friends, he could start ordering her about he would have to be shown the error of his ways. Jane smiled and her eyes sparkled as she wrote.

When the letter was read she asked Mrs. Brown to take it to the post office, and, as it chanced, Mrs. Brown met Mr. Fimloor and gave him the letter instead of going on to the post office with it herself.

"Just drop it in as you go along, Charley, and I'll step in and see Jenny," she said. And Mr. Fimloor, acquiescing, cheerfully, put the letter in his pocket and forgot all about it until next day, when he found it with a guilty start, and posted it twenty-four hours late.

He thought it best not to mention the matter, either to Jenny his wife, or to her cousin, Clara Brown, "least said, soonest mended, and I hates unpleasantness," being his ingenuous thought.

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He was on his way up to the cottage with another telegram.

"Clara, she do talk," he continued to himself. "She makes a good cup of tea, but she do talk, and between her and Jenny I shouldn't hear the last of it this side of Easter."

He came round to the back door with a cheery, "Mornin' Clara," and produced the orange envelope.

"A wonderful lot of telegrams your Miss Jane keeps a-gettin'," he remarked as he handed it over to Mrs. Brown.

"And a turn they always give me, whether or no," Mrs. Brown took the telegram gingerly as she spoke.

"And what is it this time?" she said. "Waste of money is what I calls it, and all in the pockets of them in the government as keep a gettin' everything. Not right 'tall some gets everything, an' others can just eek out 'livin'. What's that you said it was this time, Charley?"

Mr. Finlloor's slightly bewildered eyes, which had been roving as if in search of something, here came to rest upon the familiar orange envelope.

"Meaning I suppose, that telegram, Clara?" he inquired. "Oh, it's only to say as he's coming down this evening, arriving six thirty, at Lenton, and wants her to meet him." Mr. Finlloor stopped and chuckled. "It'll be a match, I suppose," he said, complacently. "Jenny, she says no; says he gave her the air once, and once off is never come through. But I says a match it'll be, for it isn't in reason to suppose as he'd be so free with his train

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fares and his telegrams if he wasn't meaning business."

"Ah" said Mrs. Brown enigmatically, "them as lives longest 'll see most."

Jane walked to Lenton to meet the six thirty. It was very dark as she stepped into the open, and she stood for a moment looking about her and watching until she could distinguish the sky-line above the trees. Her flash-light was in her pocket, but she did not wish to use it. Presently the trees and hedges stood out like ink blotches on a dense, even dusk, and Jane stepped out, with the wind blowing in her face, soft with a hint of rain to come. She loved to walk in the dark; everything so large and quiet and vague, and the wind moving on enormous gentle wings. It gave her what she called a 'biggness of the world' feeling. She felt as though she would never quarrel with any one again, not even with Walie.

Presently she permitted herself to think about Walie. Nice to be going to meet him. Nice to feel there was a person like Walie somewhere about ready to weigh in with appropriate telegrams and to catch a dull local train after office hours if you wanted him. It was even nicer to think of the tons of good advice he could place at your disposal. She would try and remember all Walter's niceness so as not to quarrel with him tonight. But, on the other hand, supposing he was too nice, supposing—Jane wrinkled her brow in the dark and then laughed. "He very nearly forgot and kissed me last time he went away!" She laughed again. "Are you going to pretend that you would mind if he did? You needn't be a hypocrite as

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well as a flirt." Then, with a sudden change of mind: "Jane, you're an idiot. You had your chance, and you threw it away, and you needn't think you're going to have fool's luck and get another chance, for that sort of thing simply doesn't happen."

It was at this moment that Jane saw the beam of light. It sprang out of the dark—dazzling, brilliant—shifted, and fell in a long ray across the lane, making the footmarks in the dust look like craters and pebbles like boulders, each with its hard inky shadow.

Jane stood still and stared. The beam came from the headlight of a motorcycle. She could just discern the vague outline close in under the hedge. The ray of light seemed to bar her way, and as she hesitated a man stepped through the lighted patch and came toward her.

"Are you Miss Bainwright?" he said.

His voice was strange to Jane, and the light had showed her no more than a pair of legs in drab overalls. Except for the fact that he seemed to have large feet, she might, as she put it to herself, just as well have seen him in the dark. She slid her right hand into her pocket and rested it on the flash-light. She meant to see something more than boots and legs before this interview was over, if luck would serve her.

"Miss Bainwright?" said the man, and she noted the trilled "r" again.

"Yes, I am Miss Bainwright, but I am afraid I have to hurry on, as I have an appoint—"

"An appointment with Major Oakers—exactly. I will not keep you long."

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"Well, what do you want then?" said Jane a little sharply.

"Now, my dear Miss Bainwright, do you really need to ask me that?"

"It would save time if you would come to the point."

"Oh, I'm not pressed for time—not in the least. It is you who are in a hurry. For myself, I find it a charming night for a talk."

"Come let me pass," said Jane, and immediately she found herself caught by the left wrist.

"Not just yet," said the man. "But I will come, as you say, to the point. You sent on Monday a message. It was to say that you were not a fool—a very interesting message, and in response to it I am here to deal with a young lady who is not a fool, but of sufficient intelligence to see when good terms are offered her."

"Let go my wrist," said Jane, in perfectly colorless tones. A white fury was upon her, which completely purged her of fear. She felt as deadly as an electric wire. The man reluctantly released her, but stood his ground.

"Good terms," he repeated.

"Well, what are they?"

"For yourself and for Ralph Sanders!"

"Yes?"

"Shall I state them?"

"That's immaterial to me!"

"For Ralph Sanders—safety and release and for you also safety and—" He leaned forward and mentioned a sum of money that fairly took Jane's breath away. She started involuntarily, and the

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man continued to speak in a low, rapid fashion that was more un-English than his accent.

"For this you will do one thing, one simple thing. You will open the red lacquer case. Ralph Sanders he has consented, he takes what has happened as an omen. To him it is fate that has intervened, and he accepts what fate has done. Only—you know him, he has a scruple of conscience—he will not himself open the case. He washes his hands of the whole thing. He has a new idea—something beneficent that shall make his name known the world over. The inventor's fever is upon him again, and for the formula in the lacquer case he has no longer any desire. 'Go to Jane, she will open it for you. Leave me in peace.'"

"Is that all?" said Jane quietly.

"Is that not enough?"

"Oh my no, absolutely not!"

"What—what more then?"

"Why the simplest thing in the world. A written authorization from Ralph Sanders." continued Jane, "That is all."

The man swore under his breath. "You cannot have it."

"In which event—" Jane made a slight gesture. The man's hand touched her shoulder and lifted again.

"Miss Bainwright, I do not think you understand. That formula we most solemnly intend to have. You say you are not a fool. Then reflect. Those who can offer such a sum as I have just offered you, is it that they will accept the present situation? I will be frank with you, as one person of intelligence with another. We have the case

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and in the case we have the formula; but we can not open the case without risking the destruction of what we seek. Our experts have examined the case and they announce that they cannot recommend an attempt at forcing it."

"No," said Jane. "That's just what Ralph Sanders told me. I expect you heard him. By the way, was it you at the window?"

The man threw out an impatient hand.

"That report of the experts decides the matter. The lacquer case must be opened. You alone know how to open it. Therefore it must be opened by you. If you open it, you are rich and safe, and if not—you are——"

"Yes, I am what?"

"I do not threaten—I beg you to understand that I do not threaten—I deal only with facts. It is a fact that if you open the case you will be rich and safe; and it is also a fact that if you refuse to open it there is no safety for you anywhere. Does a person of intelligence hesitate between such facts as these?"

"But I'm not hesitating," said Jane calmly. "There is absolutely nothing that would induce me to open the case without Ralph Sander's authority. Is that quite clear to you? I don't mind repeating it if it's not and I don't mind in the least how often I say it."

"I suppose," said the man, "that you expect me to admire your spirit. You think, perhaps, that I am impressed. Believe me when I say that so unintelligent a position merely arouses in me contempt; and if I have any other feelings, it is, perhaps, a little, yes, a little pity, because after all,



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you are young and charming, and to waste youth and charm is always a pity, is it not?"

"I really don't know," said Jane. "If you've said all you want to say, do you mind letting me pass? I want to get to the station."

"To meet Major Oakers? Yes, you may pass now."

Jane stepped back a pace and threw up her right hand with the flash light in it. Her finger pressed the switch, and the sharp little beam flashed out upon the man before her, whom she had up till now seen only as a dark blurr. Revealed in the light was a figure of medium height, a leather jacket and a head most effectually disguised by a leather cap and goggles; the chin was sunk in a dark muffler. So far as recognition was concerned she had gained nothing, and, as the light fell upon him, the man gripped her wrist and turned it back upon herself.

The sudden dazzle and glare made her call out. The man's touch seemed to be forcing fear upon her, a fear which up till now she had not felt.

He stood looking at her with the light full on her face. Then he said gravely;

"I shall be quite sure to know you again, but I do not think that you will know me. Think a little of what I have just said. Think intelligently. Good-by, Miss."

He calmly dropped her wrist, turned his back and walked over to the motorcycle under the hedge.

Jane stood where she was and heard him start the engine. She did not move when the noisy, thudding thing came by within a yard of her, but as soon as it was past she flashed her light upon the

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licence plate, and stamped her foot with sudden fury. These people took no chances. A wad of cloth, such as mechanics use to wipe their hands on, completely covered the plate, adjusted, no doubt, shortly before he met her and removable as soon as he was out of her sight.

Jane could have cried with pure rage as she put her useless light back in the pocket and set out for the station; but behind the rage was fear, and presently her anger died down and the fear rose about her like a cold mist.

When the lights of the station came into view it was all Jane could do to keep to her steady walking pace. She wanted to run, and she knew that, if she began to run, panic would take hold of her.

She came up to the station just as the London train came in. Only three passengers alighted at Lenton. One was an old woman, another a girl in her teens and the third a young man with a gladstone bag. There was no Walter. Jane stood on the platform and stared at the departing train. Walter had not come.

She slumped down on a hard, wet station bench. She sat down because quite suddenly she did not feel as if she could stand any longer. She wondered when it had rained. The seat was quite wet. It hadn't rained at Hastings. There must have been a shower here just now. Why hadn't Walter come? What on earth had happened?

Jane shut her eyes. The feeling which she had described to Walter as 'everything sliding' came upon her with renewed force; and there was no Walter to take hold of. No Walter here, and nearly three miles of dark lane between her and

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home. She got up and walked through the little ante-room with its odor of stale tobacco, its dim lights, and out through the open door beyond. She stood there and looked at the dark.

After she had stood there for five minutes and had called herself every sort of a fool she could think of she went back into the station and telephoned for a cab.

## CHAPTER IX

Walter Oakers got Jane's delayed letter on his arrival at the war office next morning. It was the third or fourth letter in a fairly big pile, and when he had read it he pushed the others on one side and rang up Scotland Yard. After a little delay he got Inspector Swimerton on the phone, and to him imparted the details of the interview on the Hasting-Lenton road as set down by Jane.

Inspector Swimerton said, "Yes," at intervals. Sometimes he said, "Yes, yes," and at the end said "Umm, quite so." An efficient person, but not conversational.

"I shall go down this morning. There's an eleven thirty train. What about you? I must get back to town tonight, but I don't think Miss Bainwright ought to be alone in that cottage. What about bringing her to London?—You don't approve? Well, perhaps you're right. But some one ought to keep his eye on her. You'll look after that? Fine. I understand, then, that from now on it won't be possible for these people to get her by herself. Good!"

Walter hung up the receiver and gave a sigh of relief.

In the meanwhile, Jane was boarding a train for London. She had passed the sort of night during which one does not seem to sleep well, if at all. and yet manages to experience a succession of vivid and rather terrifying dreams. First she

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and Walter were eloping on a motorcycle. Then she was standing before the magistrate, who was sentencing her to death because she wouldn't save Ralph's life by opening the red lacquer case. Jane woke up, and finally fell asleep again, only to have the same sort of dreams continue through the night.

In her last dream she heard Walter calling her name in a tone that changed from appeal to violent anger. So vivid was the impression that she woke to find herself half-way to the door with the tears running down her face. After that she washed in cold water and dressed herself.

By the time she was dressed she had firmly decided that she would go up to town for the day and see Walter. She considered her decision very fortunate when a telegram arrived just as she was finishing her breakfast. It read as follows: "Unavoidably detained in town. Anxious to see you. Can you come up today? Will meet ten thirty from Lenton. Walter."

The telegram put her in a better frame of mind. Walter was all right, then. He wanted to see her; she wanted to go at once, and the day, instead of presenting itself as full of veiled anxieties, suddenly cleared up and disclosed a very pleasant prospect.

Jane put on the hat she liked best, and told Mrs. Brown that she was going to shop and might be late in returning.

At Lenton, Jane, after passing through two crowded coaches, ensconced herself in a third coach, the only occupant of which was a schoolboy of fourteen or thereabouts. She had settled herself

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comfortably in a corner seat and was looking idly out of the window when she saw, advancing along the platform and scanning every coach by turn, a person upon whom her gaze rested, at first with bewilderment and then with something like horror.

The person was a woman, a quite ordinary looking woman, but she wore a shapeless gray tweed driving coat and a dark scarf, on her head a black felt hat, and she looked anxiously into every coach.

Afterward Jane might accuse herself of being jumpy and imagining things. At the time she jumped up without hesitation, opened the door, whisked out and plunged into the most crowded coach which she had previously rejected. There were women in it with market baskets, there were children eating fruit and sucking on lolly-pops. Jane took her seat thankfully in the crowd, and was impervious to the fact that her advent aroused no enthusiasm.

At the next station Jane caught another glimpse of the woman. She was walking up the platform. Suddenly a man appeared and spoke to her. Jane saw no more, for suddenly the train began its journey to London. She did not, therefore, notice that only the man got back into the train. The woman went down the steps, crossed the platform and entered the telegraph office, and dispatched a message addressed to Miss Florence King, the address being that of a club in London. The message was short and to the point; it read: "Arriving on ten thirty as arranged. Please meet." It was signed "Lorein."

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Jane sat in the coach and struggled against a feeling that the day had clouded over. Walter would meet her, and she would tell him all about everything, and then they would have luncheon, and after lunch perhaps they would see a show together. Instead of being depressed and feeling flat, she ought to be simply full of pleasant anticipation. She told herself firmly that she was full of pleasant anticipation, and then sat back and hoped that no one would notice that her eyes were full of tears.

"Oh, Jane, you're an idiot!" she said to herself.

The journey seemed to take a long time. When the train slid into the station, Jane felt as if she had been sitting in it for hours and hours. Gaining the platform, she at once began to scan the crowd for the welcome figure of Walter. There was a crowd of hurrying people all completely and utterly strange to her. She began to walk the main waiting room; Walter, of course, would be waiting for her there. And then something made her look around, and there, a few yards behind her, was the man she had seen with the lady in the tweed coat on the platform. He was coming up on her right hand side. Now he was abreast of her. He turned his head, and, in a sickening moment, Jane thought he was going to speak. Instead, he pushed against her ever so slightly and then passed on.

The man had disappeared. She looked around for the welcome sight of Walter, but there was no Walter. A horrid blankness came over her. Only last week she had run upstairs in the dark. When she came to the top she had thought there was

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still another step, and there wasn't; her foot came down hard with a jerk. The same blankness was upon her then. To expect something very confidently and to find that it isn't there, that was the feeling in both cases. It gave one a jolt and then that blankness. After last night, too.

Jane gave herself a little shake, and, still looking about her, began to cross the waiting room floor. She was looking for a man and so did not recognize Florence King, until she fairly bumped into her.

"Why, Jane," said Miss King, "what a surprise!"

And Jane found herself taken warmly by the arm, and was conscious that she was much more sincerely pleased than usual to see this old and rather outgrown friend.

She pressed Jane's arm, and reiterated her pleasure at this unexpected meeting.

"I have come up for the day," said Jane.

"How lovely. Shopping, my dear."

"Well," said Jane doubtfully, "I imagine I'll do some shopping."

"Perhaps you're meeting some one?" said Miss King brightly. "Am I in the way?"

If Walter were to turn up Florence King would most certainly be very much in the way. The thought flitted through Jane's mind and was immediately followed by another. If Walter didn't turn up? She routed this thought, but it left behind it the faint impulse to detain Florence.

"I wish to make a telephone call," she said abruptly.

"Can you wait a moment, Florence? I don't really know what I'm doing till I've made this



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call. If you could, I'd like awfully to have you wait, it's ages since we've had a visit together."

Miss King was most amiable about waiting. It appeared that she also felt it to be an age since she had seen Jane and had a good talk.

"Life's so interesting just now, don't you think?" she said. "So full of movement and development; such wonderful new ideas abroad! Don't you think so, Jane dear?"

Florence's enthusiasms were apt to leave Jane cold. They not uncommonly centered upon oddish young people rather weirdly dressed and without visible family connections.

Jane disengaged herself, therefore, without replying, entered a telephone booth and having shut the door rang up the war office, gave the number of Walter's extension and received a rather serious shock.

Miss King waiting outside heard her say, "What!" in tones of sharp incredulity and then "called out of town suddenly? You don't know where he's gone? Are you sure he's out of town? Quite sure? Have you any idea at all when he'll be back? Not to-day?—No, there's no message, no, thank you very much, except perhaps you might say Miss Bainwright phoned."

Jane came out of the booth looking pale and somewhat bewildered,

"Are your plans any clearer, my dear?" asked Miss King. Jane turned to her with relief. It was something not to be alone in this crowd which might at any moment give up the man with whom she had spoken in the dark lane near Lenton.

"Well," she said frowning a little, "I'm afraid

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my plans have all gone to pieces. I came up to see some one on business and they've gone out of town for the day, so really and truly I suppose I'd better just get something to eat at the station restaurant and take the next train back home."

"Oh, but how dull!" said Florence King. Her voice was pitched rather high. It produced an effect of bright monotony which the stress she laid upon many of her words hardly served to break.

"That's true," said Jane, "but I don't really want to do any shopping, so I guess I'll better be getting home."

"Oh, but you can't, not when you're actually here. Come and lunch with me at my club. Whatever happens, you must have lunch."

"But how about you?" said Jane.

"Why, my dear, I was just going there when I met you. I've got a really delightful plan in mind, only I won't tell you about it until we get to the club. Let's take a taxi, my car is laid-up, and I can't get it until this evening."

As Florence talked she politely piloted Jane across the waiting room floor toward the cab stand.

Jane was still rather bewildered. She followed Florence, partly because of that vague inclination to stay with some one that she knew, and partly because she was hungry and the idea of having lunch was a pleasing one.

As they drove off and Florence went on talking, Jane began to experience feelings of extreme resentment against Walter. To fail her twice was really too much. If he imagined for one moment

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that he could just send her telegrams whenever he felt inclined and make appointments only to break them—well, Jane thought she could trust herself to put Major Oakers firmly in his proper place.

"If any one is going to do anything of that sort, it'll be me, not him," she thought vigorously, if ungrammatically. She gave a little determined nod of her head, and, for the first time since leaving the station, become aware of her surroundings.

The taxi, wedged in a block, was moving slowly forward at the rate of about two miles an hour. Jane looked across to her left and exclaimed.

Miss King stopped with some offense in the middle of an enthusiastic description of the progress performed on the violin by a new Polish genius with a name like three sneezes in rapid succession. She was not, of course, aware that Jane had not heard a single word of it.

"What's wrong, Jane. My how jumpy you are!"

"I'm no such a thing. I just saw Grace Carthers, standing on that island, waiting to cross the street. Oh, I should like to see Grace again. I thought she was still in India. Florence, I'm going to get out and talk to her."

The color rushed into Miss King's face. Her arm went firmly round Jane's waist.

"No, you can't, Jane; how mad. Besides I thought you'd quarreled with Mrs. Carthers. She's Major Oakers cousin, isn't she?"

"Yes, yes, she is. I did, but it doesn't matter in the least; for I dearly love Grace."

Jane got the taxi door open an inch or two, and just then the car in front of them shot ahead. Florence King, leaning forward, pulled her back,

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and the island fell away behind them.

Mrs. Carthers on the curb, waiting to cross watched the taxi out of sight. "I'm sure that was Jane Bainwright," she thought. "I wonder if Walter ever sees her. I ought to know the other woman's face, too—a hideous hat, anyhow." She plunged into the traffic, and Jane faded from her mind.

## CHAPTER X

It was when Ralph Sanders was staring into the depressing depths of the Smugglers Leap that there suddenly came upon him the new idea. Before it came his mind was as dark as the pit below him, and then with a little spurt of light like an igniting match the infant idea was there. Immediately his consciousness turned to it, centered about it, and became blessedly unaware of all the tormenting thoughts which had been making his poor mind a battle field. It now ceased to be a battle field and became a laboratory, a place thoroughly congenial and filled with the useful and docile idea to which poor Ralph had now for weeks been a stranger.

As with his inner eye he contemplated the blessed change and with his inner man rejoiced over it, he became aware of the overwhelming necessity for some place of security and retirement where in solitude and peace he might nourish and mature the new idea. He fumbled in his pockets, pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat of a past horror from his brow. The action was definitely symbolic and Ralph Sanders' thoughts were so much uplifted that the fall of his fountain pen entirely escaped his notice. Having wiped his brow, he turned from the Smugglers Leap and walked slowly and dreamily back along the way by which he had come. Continuously he considered the twin problems which assailed him:

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The way of escape.

The place of secure retirement.

As he regained the path a buffet of wind struck the headland and scattered heavy raindrops. By the time that he came in view of the high road the full force of the risen storm was beating upon a countryside already streaming with water. The battered trees bent and strained, a distant thunder kept up a continuous rumble and for a moment Ralph Sanders stood still, dazed with the sudden noise and stress. Between the lines of wind-bent trees which marked the road there was a patch of light. Shadows of waving branches crossed it confusedly. Ralph Sanders came to the end of the path and saw a large limousine standing in the road just at his right. The headlights turned the drenched road in front of them into a silver river. The bonnet of the car was open and the chauffeur was burrowing into its depths.

Ralph Sanders stood and looked at the handsome car, the oblivious chauffeur and the stormy night. A voice spoke with extreme distinctness to an inner consciousness still grappling with the two problems. It said: "The way of escape," Ralph Sanders instantly walked across the road, opened the door of the limousine and got in. He sank upon comfortable cushions, and a feeling of peace descended on him, blotting out the storm.

After some minutes work on the engine, the chauffeur shut the bonnet with a clang, started the engine and took his seat. The car moved on its luxurious way. Twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five, forty miles an hour, with the road running swiftly past and the storm dying down. The rain con-

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tinued, Ralph Sanders sat at his ease and watched the faint lights of villages appear and pass. After an indefinite time there were more lights, and more; and then busses and street cars and street lamps with great blinding arc lights. A belated bus slid by, cutting in front of the limousine, and coming to a screeching stop. The chauffeur applied his brakes, hard, the car coming to a stop within its own length, and Ralph, opening the right hand door, calmly stepped unobtrusively off of the limousine, and into the wet pavement of the thorough-fare.

## CHAPTER XI

It was after lunch that Florence King pronounced her plan.

"You know, Jane," she said, "you really are my dearest friend, and I never seem to see you at all."

"I've been tied down with Cousin Mary," murmured Jane. She was looking around the club dining room, thinking what very odd people belonged to Florence's club.

"Yes, I know. I'm in the same boat, too, with Aunt Martha." Spoke up Florence King. "But I get out once a week, and I was thinking if you could have me—" she colored and said, just a shade of something odd in her voice; "you know we're such old friends. I could drive you back in the car, stay the night and then wander home across country. It would be rather fun finding the way."

Jane did some rapid thinking. She didn't want Florence, that was the first thought. On the other hand, nothing would annoy Walter more than to arrive and find Miss King at the cottage. Perhaps he was there now, waiting to see her. It would be extremely pleasing to arrive with Florence. Behind these thoughts there were other like faint shadows. "I hate trains, I don't want to travel alone. And I hate the Lenton road. It will be pitch black."

Thought is a very rapid process. There was no perceptible pause before Jane said aloud:

"Oh, Florence, could you really?" and was im-



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mediately assured that Florence not only could, but would.

It was while they were having their coffee that Miss King suddenly put her cup down and remembered that she had promised to telephone to a friend.

"About our meeting next week, dear," she explained. "Our big meeting—you know, I sent you the papers about it." At this point, she lapsed obviously into quotation.

At the door she nodded brightly and made her way to a phone booth.

Having got the number she asked for, she burst out volubly, "It's all right, she'll come. I've invited myself to stay the night at the cottage and offered to drive her down. Yes, quite pleased. I told her the car was laid up until this evening. If we don't start till five, it will be too dark for her to see which way we go. You're sure she won't recognize you?" She listened eagerly for a moment, and with a parting, "then you'll bring the car around at five?" hung up the receiver.

Jane, left alone, had decided that she felt exactly like a cat on a strange fence. She didn't think that she liked the fence very much, but she found the other cats distinctly intriguing. Really Florence's faculty for drifting into odd environments was amazing. The women in the club were certainly of a varied class.

Florence came back rather breathless.

"And now we're going to have a treat," she announced. "This isn't like a formal club, you know. We all know each other, and have the same aims and interests. the same soul senses, in fact; and

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some of our more gifted members are going to give out to us this afternoon."

"Give out?" repeated Jane, endeavoring to control a suddenly obstreperous dimple.

"Yes," said Florence earnestly with the gestures of one who hands food to the starving. "Don't you think genius is like that? It must give out, impart, in fact, radiate."

"I see," said Jane. "Yes,—radiate makes it quite clear. Who's going to do it?"

"Well this afternoon it's Sacha', he's going to play for us—"

"Sascha?"

Florence repeated the name that sounded like three sneezes. "I call him Sascha," she added, "it's easier, and we are very intimate."

Jane settled herself to enjoy her afternoon, and to watch the people who now began to fill the room. Florence seemed to know them all, and, according to her whispered comments, practically everyone of them was either the greatest thinker since Schopenhauer or a really divine musician or possessed of too brilliant an intellect.

Sascha played to them, and Jane found his playing very ordinary.

Two hours later she ceased to feel amused. The "gifted" ones had succeeded one another without a pause, and, while the enthusiasm of Florence and her friends appeared to remain steadily at boiling point, Jane had long ago succumbed to the cold touch of boredom. She decided that a little genius went a long way and that the less evident the genius the farther did it go.

It was, therefore, with a feeling of considerable

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relief that she emerged with Florence into the dark and foggy street. The lamp posts had misty rainbows around them; the air was raw with a damp that might turn to frost at any moment, Jane snuffed it up with appreciation and realized how dreadfully stuffy the atmosphere of genius had been.

A luxurious limousine was drawn up to the curb and a chauffeur stood beside it, holding the door open. The light under the club portico showed him as a well set up man in neat, dark livery. He turned as they crossed the pavement and Jane was startled by his extreme good looks.

Florence poured out a flood of voluble directions while Jane took her seat, then she, too, got in, the door was shut and the car moved off, gradually gathering speed.

Then Florence suddenly started, looked in her bag and accused herself of being the most forgetful woman in the world.

"A telegram," she explained; "a telegram that I ought to have sent off this morning, and it slipped right out of my head, guess the surprise of meeting you was too great. Will you mind very much if I just stop and send it off now, for it is very important that it gets off today."

Without waiting for an answer she called through the speaking tube and directed the man to stop at the nearest telegraph office. As the car stopped she jumped out and left Jane to a few minutes welcome silence.

Inside the telegraph office Florence King wrote two telegrams and sent them off. Their contents would have interested Jane. The first was ad-

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dressed to Mrs. Brown, at the cottage, and ran: "Detained for a few days. Do not forward mail. Bainwright."

The second over the address of which Miss King hesitated for a moment, was to Walter Oakers at the war office, and read: "Joining Ralph. Please do not interfere in anyway. Most important. Jane."

Jane was just beginning to feel comfortably sleepy when Florence returned and her drowsiness deepened as they ran smoothly along, first between fog-bound lights and later through the solid misty darkness. Florence talked all the time, but her voice became a mere lulling murmur. Once or twice Jane half woke up with a jerk and said, "Yes." Once she started awake and looked with blinking eyes at a crowded street pavement where a line of stalls and barrows hugged the curb under a flare of yellow gas. She gave a sharp exclamation.

For a moment she thought that she had seen Ralph standing there in the crowd of dingily dressed persons who were pressing round the stalls, but the whole thing was gone before she could take it in and she sank into sleep again, deeper — deeper — deeper. Afterward she never could decide whether it was her wakeful night and the stuffy air of Florence's club or whether that sleep of hers had been less legitimately induced.

The car slid on, smoothly and without check. The yellow mist changed to a white mist, and the white mist thinned away to nothingness. The full moon came out of a bank of fog, orange

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red at first, but growing paler as it mounted. The sky cleared to a sapphire black set with a sharp glitter of stars. They held their own for a brief half hour and then the moonlight flooded the whole arch of the sky and the level fields and lanes beneath it.

Jane woke up with a start. The car had stopped. The door was open, letting in the frost and Florence King was getting out. She heard her say, 'Shall I wake her?' and a man's voice answered, "Not if she's really sound asleep."

Jane sat up and pushed the rug off her knees. Florence and the chauffeur were standing by the car talking. Jane looked past them and saw a high stone wall, pierced by an oak door which stood ajar. This wasn't Hastings — where were they, and why had they stopped? She struggled to order her thoughts, and leaning forward, called sharply:

"Florence, where are we?"

Florence King turned. Her voice sounded high and nervous.

"Such a stupid mistake," she said. "He didn't understand, and it was so foggy I never noticed which way we came out of London. This is Charwood, my aunt's house. — You'll have to stay the night with me, instead of my staying with you—" She ended as she had begun with "Such a stupid mistake!" and a light fluttering laugh. Jane felt suddenly very much annoyed. Clara would be frantic, and Walter — Walter would — well, what would Walter think? What had possessed her to sleep like that? She picked up the rug and got out stiffly. They passed through the door in

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the wall, the chauffeur following. The door was shut behind them.

Florence went on talking.

"Such a cold night and going to be colder. Something hot to drink don't you think? Do you like cocoa? Oh, don't carry that rug, Lazare will take it."

The foreign name arrested Jane's attention, recalling it from vexed thought's of Walter and Clara. She turned on the flagged path just below the doorstep and looked with faint interest at the too good-looking chauffeur. His pale, regular features were distinct in the moonlight. His glance at Jane was a bold one as he came forward with his hands out to take the rug from her. Sharply annoyed at his bad manners and at Florence's folly in engaging a man of that type, Jane looked down. She saw the chauffeur's hands palms upward in the clear and brilliant moonlight — large hands with long, thick fingers, and, dark against the pallor of the palm, a jagged, cross-shaped scar.

"Oh," said Jane, on a little indrawn breath; and with that sound and that breath her power to move and cry went from her. The rug dropped from her hands upon the path. She tried to get her breath; to scream, to move, and as she tried, and found herself numb with the nightmare sense of helplessness, the man she stared at caught her by the arm, and the hand with the scar covered her mouth.

## CHAPTER XII

Jane did not lose consciousness, but terror rushed in upon her and benumbed her every faculty. She felt herself lifted, an arm as hard as iron about her waist, the hand crushed down upon her mouth. It was worse than the most awful dream that she had ever had. To an accompaniment of twittering noises from Florence, an "Oh do be careful!" treading on the heels of "Oh, you'll hurt her!" and "Oh, Lazare, do take care!" they crossed a hall and began to ascend a staircase. The man who carried Jane stopped halfway up the stair to say "Be quiet" not roughly, but with a certain intensity. The fact that Florence instantly held her tongue pierced through Jane's terror and set her mind groping.

The next moment Florence was opening a door and switching on the electric light. Jane felt herself set down. She had shut her eyes so as not to see the man's hand and wrist so horribly close, but now she opened them. She was in a room furnished as a sitting room. It had on the floor a green carpet ornamented by wreathes of flowers. There were two windows with rose-colored curtains drawn across them. A settee upholstered in the same material stood between the windows. On the right was a door half open. On the left a similar door, but shut. A small, bright fire burned on the hearth close to the right-hand door. The room was warm. Jane took a shaky

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step forward, leaned against the raised end of the settee and turned to face Florence King, who hovered near the door by which they had entered. The man passed to the left-hand window and stood there motionless.

Jane did not speak for two or three long, slow minutes. She looked at the comfortable, prim, everyday room, and she looked at Florence King, whom she had known since she was seven years old. Florence stared back at her with defiant eyes and a high color. At last Jane said in a sort of whisper:

"Will you explain?"

She saw Florence look past her at the man for instructions and she looked round quickly and caught Lazare's slow nod.

"Now, Jane," Florence King's tone started very high and trailed off.

Jane spoke again in that breath of a voice.

"What does this mean? Will you explain Florence?"

"Now, now Jane, dearie, there's nothing to be at all frightened about, there really isn't."

"I'm not frightened," said Jane, lying valiantly, "I am awful anxious though to know what it's all about."

"Well, dear, all that has happened it — is" she was stuck for words.

"Yes, yes? Is what?" retorted Jane rather sharply.

"Well, you've come here on a little visit and there's nothing to be afraid of, but — well, you see, Jane, in a matter of life and death one can't stand on ceremony, and we simply had to bring



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you here so as to — to — well, to reason things out with you."

"Oh, I see," said Jane, slowly. She put out her right hand and indicated Lazare, without looking in his direction. "I've seen him before, and I expect I've talked with him. And now, no doubt he wants to finish the argument we had on the road to Lenton. Is that it?"

"That," said Lazare, speaking from behind her, "is it, precisely."

"And you imagine," said Jane, "that you can keep me here against my will and that all my friends, my real friends, will just sit around and do nothing?"

"Go ahead, tell her," said Lazare, shortly.

Florence hesitated, twisted her fingers and again looked past Jane, this time in appeal.

"Tell her," repeated Lazare, and she burst at once into nervous speech.

"Jane dear, we're not cruel — and there was no need to worry people, when you were quite safe and with me, so I just sent your Mrs. Brown a telegram to say you were detained in town for a day or two and — and —"

"Am I to thank you for being so kind and thoughtful, Florence? Did you think I would?" Jane's voice had strengthened, and the color was coming back into her face. "Well, you said and —and what? Continue with your reason for this forced visit."

"Well, I sent two telegrams," Florence was between triumph and offense. "The other was to Major Oakers, to tell him that you were joining your uncle and asking him not to interfere. I

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think it's not the first time you've asked him that, is it, Jane dearie? Some years ago you told him to mind his own business, and he didn't take it very well, did he? So, I guess he'll not come and look for you after getting that telegram, do you?"

Triumph had the upper hand. Florence's hard, blue eyes were fairly blazing with it now, and their nervousness was gone. Jane looked at her, and her own faint flush died away. Her little face set and whitened. Her dark gray eyes, made darker by the inky rim of the iris, dwelt on Florence. She did not speak, but the ice of her contempt made the room seem cold. After a moment she turned toward the man.

"On the whole, I think I would rather you defined the position," she said, and Lazare replied easily.

"Just as you wish, Miss Bainwright. It is really a simple one. As you say, we have talked before. I made you a very good offer. You refused it. I make that good offer again — now. If you accept, you have only to open the red lacquer case, and I will drive you anywhere you wish. You may, after all, sleep at home to-night. If you refuse —" he paused.

"Yes — that it what really interests me," said Jane coolly. "If I refuse?"

"Then we have made certain provisions for your comfort in this hospitable house, and we hope by reasonable argument and friendly pressure to induce you to exercise a lady's privilege and change your mind." He paused and bowed. Then after a moment:

"The provisions — I will explain them. This

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door" — he pushed wide the one which was ajar— "It leads to a small, but, I am assured, a comfortable bedroom, and the other, the opposite one, to a bathroom. Only the room in which we now find ourselves opens onto the corridor. That one door has, as you will see, two stout bolts on the outside. The windows of all three rooms are barred, and have old-fashioned shutters of your English oak. They look over the vegetable garden behind the house. The rooms were so arranged and the windows barred to meet the requirements of an aunt of Miss King's who was at one time deranged. — They are very — shall I say — convenient now."

His bold and sneering look made Jane turn again to Florence King. "And your aunt?" she said, and wished her voice were louder.

"I told you," Florence tossed her head a little. "I told you at the club that Aunt Martha doesn't notice things much. She stays in bed, and thinks about old times. If you screamed the house down she would only think it was poor Aunt Liza, the one who used to have these rooms years ago. She lives in the past, you see."

"And your servants?" Jane saw Florence through a mist, heard her laugh as if from a long way off.

"They are not mere servants, but devoted friends, ready to sacrifice anything and everything to the cause. You won't find any one to help you in this house, Jane dearie."

Jane put her left hand behind her until it touched the arm of the settee. She leaned hard on it and groped with the other hand until, pass-

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ing over the smooth surface of a cushion, it found and gripped the back. Then she let herself down into a sitting position and shut her eyes.

The room was full of buzzing noises, Florence talking in a rapid whisper. Then at last Lazare:

"Get her some food, not too much," and after an interval the sound of a tray being set down.

Lazare's voice again.

"Quite useless to faint, Miss Bainwright; we are hard hearted. You had better have some supper and go to bed. In the morning we will talk again."

"I'm not fainting," whispered Jane, and was aware of Florence saying pleadingly:

"Oh Lazare, I don't like leaving her. Let me stay — let me stay," and Lazare's abrupt answer:

"Foolishness. She is tough enough for two. Come away — at once, Florence."

Then the door was shut? Jane was alone.

She heard the bolts slide home. The relief, the utter relief of being alone. She sat for a moment, drinking it in. Then opened her eyes and looked about her. They were really gone. A table had been drawn up close to the settee. There was a tray on it, an old-fashioned black tray inlaid with flowers, cocoa in a jug with a plate of bread, butter and jam and a cup and saucer. Jane did not like cocoa, but she drank all there was, and finished the bread and butter and jam. As she ate she picked up her courage and arranged her thoughts.

"I won't think to-night—I won't," she resolved. "I'll have a bath and go to bed and sleep. If I start thinking I shan't sleep."

She pushed away the table, got up and went

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into the bedroom. It was really a dressing room, comfortably furnished. The narrow bed with its rose-colored eiderdown looked alluring. A silk nightgown was laid across the foot of the bed.

Jane went into the bathroom and started drawing the hot water. The pleasant prospects of a warm bath made her think less furiously of Florence King.

When she emerged warm, clean, attired in Florence's nightgown, she felt curiously separated from the fear and misery of half an hour before. After all, this was a civilized country.

## CHAPTER XIII

It was many hours before Jane awoke. She opened her eyes, and on the instant a sense of strangeness came upon her like a breaking wave. A moment before she had been in some friendly place of dreams; then, in a flash, this strange place, dark, but not quite dark, a kind of pink dust, in fact.

Jane rubbed her eyes, sat up and shook her hair. She was remembering. The quick procession of yesterday's events rushed through her mind and in a trive she was out of bed and at the window. It was closely shuttered and the shutters were locked. Pull as she would she could not open them. A chink of light showed at the shutter's edge and Jane discovered that the darkness had been pink because of the rose-colored curtains.

She dressed rapidly. Looking at her watch she saw that it had stopped, she had no means of knowing what time it was, but she thought hopefully of breakfast. Last night's meager meal seemed a long time ago. She was very hungry, and her courage had come back to her. Yesterday's terrors seemed as far away as yesterday's cocoa.

All the same, she jumped a little when the door opened and a man came in.

He had a flat, rather stupid face and little dark eyes. Without taking the least notice of Jane, he crossed to the fireplace, knelt down, produced

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paper and sticks and proceeded to build and light the fire. After a moment, Jane said politely:

"Good morning. Can you tell me the time?"

The man continued to take no notice.

Jane tried the same remark in French, Italian and German, with the same result.

The fire began to burn and the man got up and went out again, turning out the light on his way. As soon as Jane heard the bolt go home she jumped up and put it on again. After that nothing happened for half an hour. Then Florence King came in, leaving the door ajar behind her. She stopped just inside the room and said good morning in rather uncertain tones. Jane responded cheerfully.

Florence came farther in and began to talk, her manner suggesting an odd blend of the solicitous hostess and the careful jailer.

"I'm so glad you're all right," she began with a jerk, "and, oh, Jane, you do realize that if it were anything but a matter of life and death, and, and — service to the cause — I mean you do realize, don't you? And I do hope you didn't lie awake or feel worried or anything."

"Not at all," said Jane, "I slept like a top. Are you going to open the shutters?"

"Well," said Florence, "that's just what I was going to say — about the shutters. I mean, you will be reasonable, won't you?"

"That all depends," said Jane. "What do you call being reasonable?"

"Well, if you promise not to scream — just give your word of honor, you know — I'll open them directly."

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

"And if I don't promise," said Jane, "we shall just have to go on using up your electric light, is that it?"

"It doesn't cost much," said Florence. "We make it ourselves." She spoke with perfect simplicity.

Jane burst out laughing. You couldn't go on being angry with Florence, she was *such* a little fool.

"Well, it would be a pity to waste it anyhow. I don't mind promising for — let's see — the next two hours, I should like some breakfast, before I start screaming — that is, if I'm allowed breakfast. Am I?"

Florence got very red.

"You promise not to scream or call out or wave things out of the window? It's only the vegetable garden, but we've got to be on the safe side."

"I promise for two hours."

"On your word of honor?"

"Oh my yes!"

Florence produced a key and unlocked first one shutter and then the other. As she threw them back the light came in, pale, golden, exquisite.

Jane looked out and saw a turquoise sky overhead and below endless lines of cabbages emerging from a silver mist. There was no human habitation in sight, no smoke from any chimney and no sound of traffic, nothing but the misty garden stretching to meet a hedgerow full of billowy elms and beyond the elms a belt of woodland.

She turned to find Florence looking at her with tears in her eyes.



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"Jane, you'll do what they want, won't you?" she said in a low, agitated voice. "You will won't you, dearie?"

"That all depends," said Jane evenly. "Just what do they want me to do?" Florence threw her a startled glance.

"They want you to open the red lacquer case."

"Oh, they do?" said Jane, nodding encouragement. "Why?"

"Because your uncle's formula is inside it."

"Yes?"

Florence threw up her hands and her words came with a wild rush.

"That wicked, that abominable formula! Any one who could invent such a thing or dream of letting it loose on the world is just a homicidal maniac; and if government and laws won't restrain a person like that and take his murderous weapon from him, why, I, for one, will stop at nothing to rescue what remains of civilization from the appalling fate prepared for it."

"Yes, yes," said Jane. "Of course, you wouldn't, and that's why you've kidnaped me?"

"Yes," said Florence, with a sort of gasp. "When one has to choose between such awful, awful horrors and a little discomfort to one individual do you think one hesitates?"

"I'm sure you don't," said Jane. "I don't see you hesitating for a moment. Well, what next?"

"The next move is very simple, and you can do it very readily," said Florence eyeing Jane anxiously. "Open the case and give us the formula, and, and —"

"Yes, yes, go on!"

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"You shall go free at once."

Florence came closer, her hands clasping and unclasping upon one another with an awkward yet pitiful motion. That she was in deadly earnest was plain. "And the formula?"

"Is destroyed forever."

Jane looked at her keenly. It was possible to be such a fool, for here was Florence proving it in her own person. Amazing!

"You mean you want the formula in order to destroy it?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"And Lazare, he wants to destroy it, too?"

"Lazare, dear Lazare, he is the noblest and most devoted of us all. I have never met any one like him. Oh, Jane, wait till you really know him. We are absolutely at one in our aims and ideals—the most beautiful companionship."

"Mercy — she's in love with him?" The dismayed thought flitted through Jane's mind. Aloud she said:

"Come, let's stick to the formula. You think Lazare wants it destroyed?"

"Most certainly?" Florence's surprise was quite genuine. "What — what else?"

Jane crossed to the fire, stirred it with her foot, and then turned round, hands clasped behind her and a slight smile on her face.

"Then, my dear Florence, it's all so nice and easy — he has only to meddle with the case, try and force it open, — stamp on it, put it in the kitchen fire — in fact, any old thing — and the formula will be destroyed all right. He heard Ralph tell me that there was a compartment full

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of acid which would open and flood the case if any one tried to find the spring without knowing the secret. You see it's as easy as falling off a log. Why drag me into it at all?"

Jane suddenly changed her light tone to one of deep seriousness.

"Florence," she said, "just look the thing squarely in the face. Your friend Lazare doesn't want the formula to destroy it. He wants it — and he wants to use it. He offered me a very large sum of money for the use of it. Talk about letting homicidal maniacs loose upon the world—you'll know a good deal more about it, if Lazare gets away with Ralph's formula."

The angry red flushed high into Florence's face.

"He said you would slander him —" the words came tumbling out. "I suppose you think yourself very clever, I suppose you think you can separate us, shake my faith in him, with your inventions, your clever, silly inventions, but I tell you, Jane, that nothing could shake my faith. I know Lazare — his nobility, his sacrifices, his lofty soul-sense set him very high above slanders like this. And as for what you say about destroying the case, why, you must think me very simple — very simple, indeed. Why, if we destroyed the case how could we be sure that the formula was really inside it? As Lazare says, we must make certain of the accursed thing before we destroy it. He says you may have tricked us or your uncle may have tricked us. He says we must make sure, for the whole future of humanity now hangs trembling in the balance!"

Jane groaned.

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"Oh, bosh!" she said. "Florence, you make my brain reel! How do you do it? It's like turning a tap and out it comes. I don't think I can bear any more before breakfast." She smiled sweetly, and added: "Come off the high horse for a bit, and let's get down to brass tacks."

Florence rose from her place on the settee, and fairly rushed from the room, the door banged on the word 'tacks'. The bolts were rammed home, none too gently either. Jane's 'brass tack' talk had certainly not tended to ease the situation.

She tossed her head and laughed gayly.

"Oh, well, she'll come round," she said to herself. It was not the first time she had seen Florence fling herself out of a room in a temper, and it did not greatly distress her. Her immediate concern was breakfast. Was there going to be any or was there not? The question became more and more insistent.

At last, when she had almost given up hope, the automatic person who had lighted the fire came in with the black tray. Without a word he set it down and went out again.

Jane nearly flew across the room. The tray contained but one cup and saucer, the cup half full of cocoa — There was no jug this time to refill it from, and a plate, on which a single piece of plain, dry bread met her startled gaze.

"Darn!" said Jane heatedly, and began her meager breakfast.

When the last crumb was gone she went to the window and with a dejected look wrinkled her brow at the cabbages. Her thoughts were not exhilarating.

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"Florence is a first-class prize fool. She always was. And I don't know that a first-class fool, idiotically in love with a thoroughly unscrupulous man like that Lazare creature, isn't just about as dangerous as any one can be. No use appealing to her reason — she hasn't any; or to her heart; because it's taken up with Lazare! or to her conscience, because that's at the beck and call of the 'Cause.' It's a very pretty kettle of fish. Lazare certainly gives me the creeps. I wonder if Walter will really think I sent that telegram or whether he'll guess that there's something fishy about it."

A quite horrid feeling of loneliness sprang up in Jane. Thinking of Walter was a mistake. She ought to know better. The picture of him, big, solid, comfortable, and so dreadfully far away, was being too much for her fortitude. She brushed her hand across her eyes and turned with a start to face Lazare, who was closing the door behind him. It shut, as it had opened, without making any noise at all.

Lazare advanced with a bow.

"Good morning, Miss Bainwright," he said. "I am come for our little talk — I hope a friendly one and that you will not send me away as angry as that poor Florence, whom I have met and consoled. It would be better not."

He seated himself on the raised end of the settee farthest from Jane and indicated the opposite corner.

"Sit down and we will talk."

"I prefer to stand," said Jane, her head in the air and her hands behind her back. The con-

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sciousness of tearstained cheeks lent pride to her tones.

She saw Lazare show his teeth in a smile and disliked him as much as she feared him. Seen in the daylight, he was older than she had thought; thirty-eight or so. The regular, aristocratic features had no relief of coloring; the skin was sallow pale; hair, brows and lashes all of an indeterminate flaxen. The effect was almost that of a head modeled in clay. The contrast between this head, cast in a mold of so much distinction, and the ugly, plebeian hands was very noticeable. No amount of care — and very obviously much care had been lavished upon them — could redeem their coarse brutality. A little shudder ran through Jane whenever her eyes rested upon them.

Lazare watched her for a moment and then spoke.

"Very well," he said, "but it is not my will if you stand before me as a prisoner, so do not set it down against me. Come, are you going to be reasonable?"

"Not what *you* call reasonable, Lazare."

"That," said Lazare, "is a pity. Have you ever reflected, Miss Bainwright, how much wasted energy would be saved if people would do at the beginning what, in the end, they will certainly have to do?"

"Abstract cases don't interest me," said Jane coldly.

"Very well, we will come to the point. You are admirably direct for one of your sex, differing in that respect, if I may say so, from our dear Flor-

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ance, who has a great penchant for the abstract and desires never to arrive at the point. You will open the case?"

"Need I reply to that again?" said Jane evenly. "I have already told you and Florence, No!"

"Oh, but you will. I can assure you of that. It is only a question of time."

"You think so?" replied Jane. "And supposing I do open it?"

"The rest," spoke up Lazare, "is my affair."

"Why don't you assure me that you only want the formula in order to destroy it?"

"Because, my dear Miss Bainwright, you would not believe me."

"Florence believes it," said Jane. "She actually does!" She looked at him hard and saw a faint stir of amusement in his face.

"She does me the honor of having a very high opinion of me," said Lazare politely. "I gather that you have tried to shake it. Believe me, my dear Miss Bainwright, it is a waste of time. If I were not sure of that I would so arrange that you had no further opportunity of slandering me; but as the only effect of what you say is to increase the devoted friendship with which Florence honors me I am quite willing that you should say anything you like."

## CHAPTER XIV

Lazare stayed for two hours. During these two hours he passed from sarcasm to threats, from polite ease to a manner of cold brutality. For the last three-quarters of an hour his conversation was limited to one sentence fired off at irregular intervals.

"Will you open the lacquer case?"

Jane remained standing by the window all the time, but she edged backward so she could lean against the wall. She found herself counting between sentences — "one, two, three."

"Will you open the lacquer case?" Silence, then — "one, two, three," up to fourteen.

"Will you open the lacquer case?"

After nearly an hour of it she was only just holding on to her self-control. When she was at the last gasp Lazare got up and went out, slamming the door after him. The bolts slid home.

Jane felt her way to the nearest chair and sat down. She did not think at all or want to think. She just sat and let the blessed silence soak into her. It was like water when one is very, very thirsty.

Then, the door opening and closing again, she looked up, trying to keep the sudden terror from her eyes. It was Florence with a tray — not Lazare, thank goodness.

Florence exclaimed sharply as she put the tray down:



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"Oh, Jane dearie!"

"If that's something to eat I'm ready for it," she said, and saw the unbecoming flush mount to the roots of the faded hair.

"But — they — want you to write a card first — just a few lines; and then you shall have this nice hot soup. It really is good!"

"Write a card?"

"Yes, to Mrs. Brown, just to tell her you are all right and that you don't know when you'll be back."

"Well, I won't!" said Jane, with sudden vigor.

Florence wrung her hands.

"Oh, Jane, please don't make him any angrier," she whispered. "Don't, don't, don't! I've never — never — seen him so angry — and — and it frightens me. Do write the card, please."

While Florence spoke Jane tried to think. "A little ray of hope flashed upon her.

"No, I won't write a card," she said at last, "I'll write a letter."

"But — why?"

"I don't like post cards," said Jane, "never did. Perhaps I don't like acting under compulsion either. Anyhow, I'll write a letter if I write anything. I don't mind saying that I'm ready for the soup." She talked on to give herself time.

Florence fluttered nearer the door.

"I — I might ask him," she said, waveringly. — "There couldn't be any harm in just asking; at least I don't see how there could be. I think I'll just ask him."

The last nervous sentence took her out of the room.

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Jane had the cup of soup in her hand as the door closed. She drank it in great gulps, making sure of it before she began upon the slice of bread. When Florence touched the handle of the door she had only eaten half of the meager slice. The other half went into the pocket of her coat.

Florence came in in a flurry.

"He says you may write the letter, but not to imagine that you can play any tricks." Then, as her eyes fell upon the empty tray, she gave a startled little cry and looked frightened.

"Oh, Jane, what will he say!"

"Is there any need to tell him?" said Jane, and knew as she spoke that Lazare would not be told, so much was evident from Florence's look of relief.

She pushed her chair up to the table, took ink, pen and writing paper from Florence and sat down ready to begin. She had her plan. It was a risk, of course, but that didn't really seem to matter now. She looked seriously at Florence and said with a sort of careful simplicity:

"What do I put on the top of the paper?"

"London," said Florence.

"Only London. I don't suppose she'll think about it at all."

Jane wrote London in the right hand top corner. "Do I put a date?"

"Yes, date it to-day."

Jane dated it. Then she dipped her pen again and wrote in a style carefully modeled on Cousin Mary's letters to servants: "Mrs. Brown," Florence instantly took the sheet away and tore it up.

"Now, Jane," she said angrily, "What's the good of that? You know perfectly well you wouldn't

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write like that to an old servant like Mrs. Brown, nobody would."

"No? Well, Cousin Mary always did."

"That may be, but you wouldn't, so it's no use your trying to play those sort of tricks, to make her believe that there's something wrong."

"I'll write anything you like," said Jane meekly. "Shall I say, 'Darling Mrs. Brown.' and send her my love?"

Florence tapped an impatient foot. "Write the way you always do," she said at length.

"All right," said Jane.

She dipped her pen, wrote the place and date again and then, more slowly, "Dear Mrs. Brown."

Florence looked over her shoulder and nodded.

"Now put: I'm obliged to stay here for a day or two. I will write again when I know my plans. Don't forward any mail, as I may be back any day."

Jane wrote with bent head, a little glow of triumph warming her as she remembered other careless scrawls which began, "Dear Clara," and were rounded off by wildly illegible initials. It would be odd indeed if Clara were not suspicious over this formal note. At least if she did not suspect she would be seriously huffed, and in either case she would certainly talk about it to all and sundry.

She looked up as she finished writing 'any day' and inquired:

"Anything else?"

"No, guess not," said Florence, "that will do very well. Now sign it."

Jane wrote "Jane Bainwright" in her best hand,

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while Florence, watched her, frowning.

"Don't you put 'Yours truly', or anything?"

"I will if you like," and Jane wrote in 'Yours truly,' above the signature. She addressed the envelope which Florence laid before her and put down her pen with a dejected air which by no means corresponded to her inward feelings.

"What about some more soup?" she said, "There wasn't very much and I've done what you asked."

"Oh, I can't, I really can't!" said Florence, and went out quickly with the empty tray.

Jane finished the half slice of bread, settled herself comfortably on the settee and went to sleep.

She woke from a dream of fighting cats, opened her eyes, rubbed them and wondered if she were still dreaming.

A young man was standing in the middle of the room playing a minor scale on the violin. As his melancholy dark eyes met Jane's sleepy ones she recognized the young man with the unpronounceable surname who had been one of the 'artists' at Florence's club.

She blinked at him with innocent kitten eyes and said.

"I didn't hear you come in. You are M. Sascha, are you not? I heard you play at the club." The minor scale proceeded. Interwoven, with it phrases almost totally unintelligible.

Jane was unable to decide whether it was embarrassment or an almost complete ignorance of English which produced this confusion, but confusion there certainly was. She repeated her

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remark in French, inquiring at the end of it whether monsieur spoke French.

The melancholy eyes looked offended. In atrocious but fluent French M. Sascha informed her that he was an educated Pole and that all educated Poles spoke French. Whilst he spoke he continued to play the scale.

"Then let us talk," said Jane.

She began to realize why she had dreamed about a cat fight. M. Sascha's notes were of a piercing intensity.

"You can tell me about Poland. I've never been there."

There was a momentary gleam in the violinist's eyes, but he shook his head and began to play at top speed.

A curious idea slid into Jane's brain. Ralph and the story of the young violinist who was a spy. If it were Sascha. It might have been. Jane ventured a chance shot. Leaning forward and smiling sweetly, she let her gaze rest admiringly upon the young man and inquired.

"Did you ever finish your 'Symphonie Chemique,' Monsieur?"

The effect was instantaneous. His bow halted on a discordant note, then dropped, whilst a flood of words broke from his lips.

"My Symphonie, you have heard of it? Ah, Mademoiselle, what felicity! But until you have heard it you cannot conceive all that there is in it of inspiration and of terror. And the moment of that inspiration—wonderful! An experience of the most remarkable. See, you are sympathetic. I will recount it to you. I stand—regard me—I

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stand in the laboratory at midnight. It is dark. Only a single ray from an electric torch pierces the gloom and discloses those machines by which men wrest from reluctant nature her sublime secrets."

He began to play as he spoke.

"See, this is the motif of darkness, typifying the immense darkness of ignorance pierced by the single ray of inspiration. I look around me. I behold all these things. They repose, these forces, these terrors. They lie concealed in a powder, in a liquid in an acid that frets to be free.—Listen to the motif of the picric acid. It dreams already of the bomb that is to be. See, I will play to you its dream."

Jane gazed at this unbelievable young man who glistened with earnestness. She watched his agile, dirty fingers, and listened to the dream of the picric acid which ended in a tolerable imitation of an explosion, mingled with what she imagined to be the shrieks of the injured. As the last piercing wail died away Sascha threw back his long dark hair, placed his right hand, still grasping the bow, over his heart and bowed to his audience. Jane delighted him by clapping. She also cried bravo twice and smiled again.

After this half an hour passed very pleasantly. The dream of the picric acid was succeeded by love passages. He talked all the time and, the music having ceased to describe explosives, Jane's eyelids closed. When he embarked upon a soft sleepy tune, she, too, slept. It was very nice and peaceful after Lazare.

A discord waked her. Footsteps in the passage

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and voices—Lazare and Florence. Sascha clutched his damp brow.

“Woe is to me, I have forgotten for my symphonie!” he panted. “I was to play scales and exercises—to practice, and every minute I was to ask: ‘Will you open the lacquer case?’ Mon Dieu, what will Lazare say?” He looked terrified. The door was begining to open.

Florence and Lazare came into the room.

## CHAPTER XV

When Walter Oakes reached Hastings and discovered that Jane had gone up to London for the day he experienced feelings of great irritation. Why should Jane go to town? If she must go, why go-today? Mrs. Brown was not very talkative. Like David, she held her tongue, and it was pain and grief to her. Afterward, in the society of Jenny Fimloor, she made up for this unnatural silence.

Walter got Florence King's telegram about an hour after his return to town. He had gone to his room at the war office in a bad temper. The telegram did not sweeten it. It was mysterious, and he hated mystery.

'Joining Ralph'—where, and why—in heaven's name why? And then the snub direct—'on no account interfere.' That cut. Walter did not admit it, but it cut. He covered the wound with anger, the anger of a man is struck by a friend. The blow fell on the old wound and roused the old resentful pain. He told himself that he washed his hands of Jane Bainwright. This was the second time she had told him to mind his own business, and, by heaven, she should not have to tell him that or anything else again.

Major Oakers wrote late, his brain busy, his face like a thunder cloud. Clerks had their heads bitten off. Altogether Florence King would have con-



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sidered that her telegram had enjoyed quite a success.

Next day Walter lunched with his cousin Grace Carthers, she was his favorite cousin, but she found him a none too easy guest of the monosyllabic and abstracted order.

Grace was pretty, dark and lively. Her eyes began to sparkle behind their justly admired lashes. She sought a weapon with which to prick this monstrous indifference and found one to her hand in the suddenly remembered glimpse of Jane. She tapped on the table with a pretty ringed hand and said:

"Ever see anything of Jane Bainwright these days, Wal?"

She had the satisfaction of seeing her cousin blush.

"Er—um—sometimes."

"Well, I saw her yesterday in a taxi with a woman whose face has been worrying me ever since. I remembered her at once—Jane I mean—she hasn't changed a bit. I thought she looked awfully pretty, but I can't place the woman she was with, though I knew her face. You know how worrying it is when you cannot get hold of a name or a face. There, I almost had it then, but it's gone again—older than Jane, rather hard, an appalling hat. Oh, Walter—I've got it; the hat did the trick. I know where I saw her last—I remember it now, the suffrage raid; and they let Jane go, but this woman got two months or something like that. Her name is— — —."

"Florence King" spoke up Walter before she could continue.

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Walter's tone was indifferent, but Grace looked at the big hand clenched on the table and saw the knuckles whiten.

"Why—yes, it was, Walter; why what's the matter."

"Nothing," said Walter. "Jane's affairs have nothing to do with me." And he began to make violent strictures upon a new play which neither he nor Grace had seen. They went on talking about plays, and, when lunch was over and Walter excused himself on the score of work, his cousin Grace watched him go with a little amused pity in her dark eyes.

It was Monday that Jane walked along the Hastings road, and met the woman in the tweed driving coat. On Tuesday she talked with Lazare in the pitch dark of a lane near Lenton station. On Wednesday she went to town and met Florence King instead of Walter Oakers. Thursday was the day of Walter's lunch with Grace Carthers, and it was on Friday that Inspector Swimerton rang up.

At first sound of the clipped, laconic speech, Walter Oakers' expression changed.

"That you Major Oakers? Inspector Swimerton speaking."

"Yes, this is Oakers, what is it?" For the life of him Walter could not keep the words from hurrying.

The Inspector's voice came to him over the wires with maddening deliberation.

"Thought I'd better ring you up. Bit of queer start down at—you know where. Young lady not back. Haven't heard from her, I suppose?"

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"Yes, er, no."

There was a pause.

"I should rather like to come round and see you, if you'll be at liberty."

"What do you mean by a queer start? Yes, I'm in, come round."

There was no reply, the Inspector having rung off. He arrived presently, a wooden faced person, very neat and well set up. He took a chair before he replied to Walter's immediately repeated question "What do you mean by queer start?" Then he said:

"Just got back from Hastings when I rang you up. My man there wired me to come down this morning. Seems the housekeeper got a letter from the young lady this morning, and an hour afterward it was all over the village that the letter wasn't from the young lady."

"A letter from the young lady,—that wasn't from the young lady?" cried the excited Walter. "What do you mean?"

"That's what I said to Harkins, the man down there, and all he could say was that such was the talk in the village. Well, I went up to the cottage and saw the housekeeper, and—well, to cut a long story short, here's the letter, sir."

He took out a pocket case, extracted Jane's carefully written note and put it into Major Oakers' eagerly outstretched hand.

"What do you make of it, sir?" he said.

Walter looked at the letters steadily.

"It's—it's her handwriting," he said at once, "but"—he frowned and narrowed his eyes.

"Well, sir?"

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"It's—it's too tidy, formal. It looks as if she'd written it very slowly, making every letter—oh, hell, Swimerton,—it's her writing, all right, but it's not—her."

The inspector gave a slow nod of understanding.

"Just what Mrs. Brown said, only she put it on different grounds. She said, 'It's Miss Jane's writing, but Miss Jane never wrote me a letter that began and ended like that', and she stuck out that the young lady never wrote it. Says she always wrote to her 'Dear Cally,' and always signed the letters with only her initials."

"Then—what?"

"That isn't all, sir. After a bit of pumping she told me Miss Bainwright went to town Wednesday to meet you, sir, leastway to meet some one who wired her to come up, and signed the wire 'Walter.' I take it you didn't wire?" Walter shook his head.

"Well, some one did. It was handed in at the Charing Cross telegraph office at eight A. M. sender's name and address not filled in, and the girl will get into trouble for that. Just now, when I asked you on the phone whether you'd heard from the young lady or not, I didn't know what to make of your answer, sir. Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling whether you have heard from her?"

Walter pulled a drawer open, took out Florence's telegram, and handed it over without speaking.

"H'm," said Inspector Swimerton. "Ralph being—?"

"Ralph Sanders," informed Walter, "that's what she called him."

"H'm, Well, that's not all either. Wednesday

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Miss Bainwright got the wire telling her to come up to town, but she'd already walked to Lenton station the evening before to meet the six thirty. You didn't send a wire asking her to do that, did you, sir?"

"Certainly not!"

"Well, Mrs. Brown says you did, so I followed that up, and here's a copy of the wire somebody sent. Same telegraph office, you see. Now, sir, here are three telegrams, two supposed to be from you and one supposed to be from the young lady, the two from you being fakes. Well, sir, I just leave it up to you. What about it?"

Walter pushed back his chair. If Jane's telegram was a fake—but whose fake? Not a stranger's. It must be somebody who knew her pet name for old Sanders, and who knew also just where to catch him, Walter, on the raw. Who on earth? And the answer came in his Cousin Grace's pretty teasing voice, "I've got it, Florence King." He brought down his fist with a bang on the desk, and leaning forward he burst into speech. In ten minutes the inspector was in possession of a good many miscellaneous facts and surmises regarding Miss King. Her 'suffrage' history, with its one or more terms of imprisonment; her affiliation with the new party of peace; her faculty for attracting odd and dubious persons; her comfortable income; and her address—? No, for the life of him Walter could not remember where she lived—with an aunt somewhere he thought.

"And Mrs. Carthers saw Miss Bainwright with this party? On Wednesday? Is she sure it was Wednesday?"

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"We'll make sure."

Walter grabbed the telephone, was fortunate in finding Grace at home, and began to put a series of questions to her.

"You remember seeing Jane Bainwright in a taxi with Florence King? What day was it? You're sure it was Wednesday? Absolutely sure? Sorry to bother you, but it's very important."

Grace's exasperated voice rang in his ears.

"Really, Walter, you're the limit! Of course I'm sure. I'd been down to see Teddy, and was on my way to lunch with Alice. Yes, and I'm quite certain it was Florence King; I always loathed her. By the way, Jane saw me and tried to get out—their taxi was stuck in a jam—but the King creature pulled her back. Pretty fair cheek, wasn't it? What happened then? Oh, the jam gave way, and they whisked out of sight. I'd like to have seen Jane; I've always liked her awfully well. I say, I hope there's nothing wrong."

"Ask what Miss Bainwright was wearing, sir," said the inspector quickly.

Walter asked the question, and heard Grace's soft musical laugh.

"My dear boy, what a flattering interest! Well, if you really want to know, and as far as I could tell, Jane had on a little black velvet beret, gray fur and a dark gray coat, I could only see half of her, so I can't tell you what her shoes and stockings were like. The little hat was awfully becoming," she laughed again.

Walter said good-bye, and repeated the substance of Mrs. Carthers description of Jane's clothes. The clothes corresponded with Mrs.

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Brown's description. The inspector's comment was that it was all very odd. He supposed he'd better be getting along, and added that he expected to be able to get Miss King's address without much delay; when he had it he would run down and take a look around.

As he went out he nearly fell over a clerk hurrying down the passage. The incident faded immediately from his mind. It would have interested him more if he had known that the young man who sped on his way with apologies could at once, and from memory, have supplied him with the missing address.

## CHAPTER XVI

It was Saturday morning.

Jane stood by the barred window, her back to the rose-colored room that she loathed, her hands gripping one of the heavy bars.

The last forty-eight hours had been a nightmare. She had not undressed or slept for longer than an hour or two at a time. She had been kept on a starvation ration of dry bread and weak cocoa. She had not been alone for more than ten minutes at a time. When Lazare left Florence would come with her obvious, her increasing terror, her tearful entreaties, her appeals. When she went away another woman took her place; Florence called her Nadine. She was hard-faced, dark and silent. Her part in the household seemed to be that of nurse to old Miss King. Jane feared her, and believed her to be utterly without compunction. Then Sascha would be sent into the room to practice, and at intervals to ask her the one intolerable, maddening question: "Will you open the red lacquer case?"

Sascha, it was true, was the best of the four. He could be diverted into discoursing of his art, persuaded to play his own compositions and to ignore the fact that she promptly went to sleep. Yesterday he had brought her an illicit slice of cake.

Lazare had just left her and she was trying to steady her shaken, trembling thoughts. For two



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hours he had been battering her with the one question, and at the end had gone away in a cold fury that shook Jane's self-control and left her dazed.

"You think," he said, "you think that we shall not proceed to extremities — you feel yourself sheltered by Florence — you think she will not let them go too far. I tell you" — he stood in the doorway, a hand on either jamb, his light eyes hard on her — "I tell you, I am at the end. Till this evening I give you and no more. Then, if you do not open the case, you go elsewhere, where there will be no Florence, no other woman, not even that young fool Sascha, who begins to be soft-hearted over you, no one but myself, and some others perhaps even less sentimental than I am. There are ways of making a woman do as one wishes. Believe me, we shall employ them."

He stood in silence for a moment, then let his hands fall from the door jambs. There was finality in the gesture. They fell heavily. The door shut. The bolts slid home.

It was then that Jane turned from the room and gripped the cold steel of the window bars. Her eyes, unseeing, stared at the sky. She did not know how the time passed. There was no time. Only a cold and desolate fear, colder than the iron and more desolate than pain.

When she heard the door open she let go of the bars and turned round, her head up, whistling a little soft tune. They shouldn't see that she was frightened, anyway.

Sascha came in, violin in hand. Jane went on whistling. It wasn't so difficult as when she

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thought it might be Lazare returning. The Pole shut the door and came forward.

"You whistle?" he said. "Lazare leaves you in such anger as I have never seen and you can whistle? It is nothing to you?" He waved the violin at her and his ugly French became more rapid still. "You are brave, but it is mad to be too brave — mad, Madame, mad!"

His eyes preached her. They were soulful eyes, very like those which a dog fixes upon a mistress whose cruelty refuses him cake at tea. Then with a start he searched all his pockets, and at last produced a large slab of chocolate neatly folded in silver paper. With a deep bow he handed it to Jane who actually found that she wanted to cry.

"Oh, Sascha, you're a dear!" she said, and a bright round tear fell on the silver paper. She whisked its successor away, curled herself up on the settee, and began to eat the chocolate whilst Sascha played weird harmonics, expressive, as he informed her, of a life's unalterable devotion. To these touching strains she fell asleep.

## CHAPTER XVII

At four o'clock that afternoon Lazare came away from the telephone with the look in his face which Florence feared more than anything else in the world.

He met her as he turned from the instrument, took her familiarly by the arm and marched her into the dining room. He had shut the door, and she was fluttering and asking: "What—what is it?" when he abruptly bade her be silent for once and listen.

"Major Oakers is coming down here," he said, and, as Florence gasped and caught at his arm, he went on:

"If you're going to be useless to me, say so at once, and I go elsewhere."

"No, no, Lazare dear, — why do you speak to me like that? You know I'll do anything."

"Yes, you'll do as I say, exactly and without any protest?"

She bent her head, struggling with the tears which he hated. Lazare unclasped her hand from his arm before he spoke again. Then he said:

"Major Oakers and Inspector Swimerton are coming down together. Something has made them suspect you — yes, you, my Florence — and they are coming down with a search warrant. They are coming by car. We have an hour, or perhaps, since one of them is an impatient lover, three-quarters of an hour. Major Oaker's car could not do

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it in less. There is, therefore, no need for panic."

"How — how do you know?" gasped Florence.

"My dear Florence, what a question! One has ears and eyes everywhere in an affair like this. 'A' collects information about Major Oakers and 'B' shadows Inspector Swimerton. Both report to 'C', whose duty it is to keep me informed. Very simple. Now you have to listen. This is what you must do. You will go to Jane Bainwright and you will weep. That much for you, will be, no difficulty task."

Florence flushed deeply and he went on:

"You will weep, and you will say that you cannot any longer bear this state of things, your heart is torn, and you cannot bear it. See how much in character is the role which I assign to you."

"What do you mean?" Florence fell back a pace, looking at him strangely.

"It is most simple. Your heart is torn, you can bear it no longer and you offer to let her go. Nadine is in your aunt's room, Sascha and I in here. You take her out by the back way, up the garden and through the gap in the hedge. In the lane there you will walk as far as the stile. Then you will tell her to get over the stile and take the footpath through the fields. Meanwhile you yourself will return to meet Major Oakers."

"You — you're going to let her go? Oh, thank God!"

"You thank a little too soon. I let her go as the foxy cat lets the mouse to run a little way, to think itself free; and then again — the sharp claws and the glaring eyes. I think that the psychological effect will be good, quite apart from

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the necessity of having an empty house for Major Oakers and his inspector to search."

The high flush died out of Florence's face. She put out her hands rather aimlessly, and said in a choked voice:

"You — mean to bring — her back?"

"Most certainly!"

She burst into tears.

"I — I can't — do it. I can't. I thought you really meant to let her go. Why don't you? Oh, Lazare, why don't you? We've gone far enough — too far — I can't go on, I — I can't!" She began to sob bitterly.

Lazare looked at her with contempt.

Jane woke up with a start as Florence came into the room. Still sleepy, she heard Sascha dismissed, and seized a moment when Florence's back was turned to slip the rest of the chocolate into her pocket. She sat up and blinked at Florence, who immediately said:

"Jane, darling, oh, Jane," and burst into a flood of tears.

"Oh, Florence, for goodness, sake!" said Jane crossly. "Get hold of yourself, or I'll have to shake you into your senses."

Florence choked down a sob, and came close and whispered:

"Oh, Jane, you're in such frightful danger."

"Yes, I know," said Jane. "But crying about it won't help."

Emotional conversation with Jane was apt to be one sided. There was as much offense as emotion in Florence's, "Oh, Jane, but you are."

"All right," said Jane, "We'll take it that I am.

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Don't you think that as my very oldest—er, friend, and my actual hostess, it's rather up to you to do something about it?"

"Yes, yes," said Florence with another sob, "that's what I mean, — that's why I'm here — as your friend, Jane dear. I can't bear it any longer. My poor heart is torn, and I can't bear it, and I'm going to let you go."

Jane steadied herself against this unexpected rush of hope. It was like being struck by a big wave, but she kept steady and controlled her voice.

"Good work!" she said. "It's decent of you and I shan't forget it." Her hands gripped each other. "When?" she asked.

"Now at once. We must hurry whilst the coast is clear. Here's your coat and your fur. Your hat's on the table."

She put on her outdoor things in silence, and then drank what she hoped would be the last cup of cocoa that she need ever taste. Hunger and the emergency alone could have got it past her lips. As it was she fixed her mind on the great fact that she was being set free and swallowed it.

Florence tiptoed along the passage and came back.

"Quick!—there's no one there. I'll go first," she said, and Jane followed her into the passage. It was getting dark and no lights had yet been lit. The murmur of voices came from a room on their left. "Aunt Martha — quick — Nadine is there," whispered Florence, and they reached the stair head. Jane held tightly to the banister like in a dream. The dusk, the hurry, and Florence's whispering voice. They passed a half landing with

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two doors and came down a short flight into the lower hall. Florence took her by the arm, turned a corner, opened a door and they were in the empty kitchen. The evening damp struck them as they left the kitchen door. They left the house and the ghosts of dead meals behind. It was lighter out here and they hurried through the vegetable garden until fruit trees began to screen them from the house. Jane was dragging a little on Florence's arm as they turned into a walk between high box hedges but she kept on gallantly. The walk ended in broken woodland guarded by a rough hedge growing on a bank. Florence made for a gap, slid down into a lane beyond and turned to give Jane a helping hand.

Jane, in the lane, leaned against the bank panting.

"All right in a minute," she said and when the minute had passed:

"Now where?"

"Just down the lane as far as the stile. It's only a hundred yards or so and then you get the footpath across the fields to Upper Elvery. It's two miles. Can you manage it, do you think?"

Jane nodded fiercely. Manage it? With Lazare behind her?

They pushed on to the stile in silence and there Florence stood still.

"I — I must go back. You can't miss the way if you keep to the footpath. It comes out on the Upper Elvery road two miles from here. Turn to the right when you get to the road and you'll be at the station in ten minutes."

Jane climbed over the stile and turned. Flor-

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ence was just a dull blur in the shadow of the overhanging beeches. She did not move either to go or to take the hand which Jane held out. Perhaps she did not see it.

"Good-by, and — thanks," said Jane.

"Why didn't you open the case, why didn't you?"

The words seemed to burst from Florence's lips. Jane stared. "Oh, come, Florence," she said, "don't dig that up again. You know why, or if you don't it's because you can't take in some of the plainest speaking I've ever wasted on any one. So long, I expect we'll meet again some day."

"It's your own fault," said Florence very low, and with that she turned and ran back along the lane.

Jane shrugged her shoulders, told herself that she would be able to bear up if she never saw Florence King again and set out across the fields. The dusk was passing into darkness. Hedgerows and trees were inky black against a fading dove-colored sky. The footpath was narrow, cow-trodden and muddy, the air very cold and damp, Jane drew in great breaths of it, and it was sweeter to her than the primrose scented air of spring. She walked, relieved from an intolerable pressure, an intolerable dread; for in her own mind she knew that what she feared most of all was not what Lazare might do to her but whether for any fear or pain she might weaken and give way.

She walked on, released, and the dusk covered her.

Florence ran back to the house as if it were she who were pursued. She panted as she ran, and kept repeating over and over, "It's your own fault.



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Jane. It's your own fault. I can't help it, I can't do anything. It's your own fault, Jane, your own — fault."

Lazare was waiting for her at the back door. He took her by both arms and brought her into the lighted kitchen.

"She has gone across the fields?" he asked sharply, and Florence trembled and said.

"Yes, dear."

"It will take her more than half an hour to reach the road. I can be there in ten minutes. Now, this is what you have to do. First wash your face, and you are not to weep again or I am done with you. Then you will send Nadine down here, and you will sit and read aloud to the old lady. That will compose you. I am taking the car out at once, and I may drop Sascha in the village where he may sit at the inn until the coast is clear. When Major Oakers arrives you will be polite and surprised. You will let the inspector search the house. If you are asked where is the chauffeur and the car, he has gone into Ledington to have a prescription made up for your aunt. I will really do that in case they make inquiries. I shall just have time. When they are gone — ten minutes later you will turn on the lights in my room and leave the blinds up, I can see that from the cross-roads."

He turned to go and heard Florence's voice, plaintive and hesitating:

"You haven't — oh, Lazare, I have done it, aren't you — pleased?"

"I shall be, when it is finished," he said harshly and went out.

## CHAPTER XVIII

"This must be the place, sir. Two miles out and a high wall running all along the side toward the road —"

Major Oakers brought the car to a standstill and swung round, his hand still on the steering wheel.

"Well, — what's the procedure?" he asked.

"Ask if the lady is at home as if you were paying a friendly call, I should say, sir."

"No thanks, Swimerton. It's a beastly job, but goodness sake don't make it any worse than it is. This is an official visit and you do the talking."

"Very good, sir — it's all in the day's work as far as I'm concerned."

They got out, tried the door in the wall and found it unlocked, whereat the inspector frowned.

"Humm, either there's nothing in it or they're expecting us," he said, as they passed in.

There were lights in the front of the house. One room on the ground floor showed a glow behind curtains. From a bedroom above it a broad ray of warm light streamed out upon the dusk.

Walter pressed the bell, but the inspector lifted up his hand and beat a heavy tattoo with the knocker. The sound died away and a momentary silence was broken by the tapping of high heeled shoes upon a stone or brick floor. An instant later the unbolted door was opened by a woman in the gray alpaca and white linen of a nurse —

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rather hard of features, but very correct, with dark inquiring eyes.

Walter summed up Nadine in these terms, while the inspector was asking for Miss King, and they were being shown upstairs as far as a half landing which displayed two doors. Nadine opened the one upon the right, switching on the light as she did so, and they were left in a primly old-fashioned drawing room. It was of good size, but so crowded with odd pieces of furniture to lose all effect of size. Heavy brocaded curtains hung before the two windows. An enormous piano occupied the far end of the room.

After a short wait the door at the other side of the room opened and Miss Florence King came into the room. She had washed her face as Lazare had bidden her. She had also composed herself to the best of her ability, but she was obviously in some agitation as she came forward and inquired:

"Did you wish to see me?"

"You are Miss King," inquired the inspector. Walter for his part merely bowed, and wished for the hundredth time that they were through with it and on the road again.

"Yes, I am Florence King."

"Then I have a few questions to ask you, if you will be so good as to answer them." The inspector here dived into his pocket and produced a notebook from which, having cleared his throat, he proceeded to read:

"When, if I may ask, did you last see Miss Jane Bainwright?"

Florence flushed scarlet and swung round on

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Walter. "Jane? You're Major Oakers, aren't you? Isn't Jane at — Hastings? Don't tell me there's anything — wrong?"

"One minute, Miss King" — the inspector's tone was dry — "I asked you a question, and I'll be obliged if you'll answer it."

"But — but I don't know what you mean. What does he mean?" and she again addressed herself to Walter.

"I asked you, Miss King, when you last saw Miss Jane Bainwright," repeated the inspector sharply.

Florence had a moment of indecision. Then in the nick of time she remembered the meeting with Grace Carthers, and said with an air of offense:

"I don't know why you ask me that, but of course, I have no possible objection to answering any questions. I met Miss Bainwright by chance on Wednesday last, and she lunched with me at my club."

"When did she leave?"

"She left with me at about four-thirty or possibly five o'clock. I had my car outside, and I drove her to the Piccadilly station and dropped her there."

"You'd be prepared to swear to that?"

"Why, of course," Florence stared at him with hard blue eyes. "And now, perhaps, you'll tell me why you ask me all this, and what Major Oakers has to do with this — this inquisition? Have you joined the police, Major Oakers?"

She gave her high laugh, and Walter felt his old antagonism rise until it almost choked him. The woman rang false, and if she had injured Jane, if

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she had! He looked gravely at Florence King and did not say a word, while the inspector, wooden and imperturbable, continued his questions.

"What does the household consist of? How many servants? Length of service?"

"H'm — all foreigners," was his sole comment, as Florence with each reply became more obviously worried and upon the defensive. As he closed the note-book he said: "And you dropped Miss Bainwright at the Piccadily station shortly after five o'clock?"

"Yes, — I told you so."

"H'm" — a pause, then sharply, "Then tell me if you will, how you can account for the fact that she was seen driving with you through Ledington nearly an hour later?"

Florence turned scarlet. If she had been less angry she might have broken down, but the inspector's manner had fretted her temper to the breaking point. She stared at him furiously.

"I can't account for things that didn't happen."

"You assert that you were alone in the car when it came through Ledington."

Florence's restless brain was working quickly enough. It had been dark — too dark for any one to have more than an impression about the occupants of a closed car. It must have been the policeman at the level crossing in Ledington who had thought there were two people in the car. Impossible that he could be sure, — impossible.

"Of course," she said, so calmly that the inspector thrust the note book into his pocket and remarked that, if Miss King were ready, he would like to go over the house.

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"You've got a warrant?"

He showed it to her and she led the way to the door.

"Upstairs, first, please."

They mounted the stairs in silence. At the top Florence opened the first door on the right.

"My aunt's room," she said stiffly, and they looked in upon a scene which she felt to be extremely reassuring.

Old Miss King was sitting up in the bed with an embroidered cashmere shawl about her plump shoulders. The room was full of the comfortable glow of firelight and shaded lamps. The light fell softly on the old lady's pink cheeks and eyes of china blue.

By the fire sat Nadine sewing. In effect, a most reassuring scene.

Walter was conscious of hot embarrassment and even the inspector coughed and became aware of his heavy boots.

"A man to see about the lights, Aunt Martha," said Miss King, going up to the bed and speaking gently.

Walter frowned. The words came so glibly. Did one lie like that without practice? Suspicion was hot in him in spite of the old lady and her nurse.

"The door beyond?" said the inspector gruffly.

"A dressing room. Nadine will show it to you." Florence's tone was indifferent, but the inspector did his duty and tramped across the soft carpet with his long strides to inspect a dressing room which certainly did not contain Jane Bainwright. Meanwhile old Miss King had turned her head.

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The china-blue eyes dwelt vaguely on Walter and presently she said in a sweet, fluttering voice:

"Don't I know you, my dear?"

Walter came a step or two nearer and said:

"My name is Oakers, Miss King. What a beautiful cat."

The old lady beamed at him.

"Felix, do you hear that?" she said to the cat on her bed. "The gentleman says you are beautiful; and he's a very good pussy, too, which is better than being handsome." She nodded gravely, and then added in a confidential whisper — "He understands everything, every word. We mustn't make him vain."

They left the room feeling that Miss Florence King had scored. She herself had a slight air of conscious triumph as she passed before them up the passage and threw open a door upon the left.

"These were my Aunt Eliza's rooms. She was not herself for some time and we had to have these bars put up. I use the sitting room occasionally."

"Now, why," thought Major Oakers as he stood in the doorway — "why so much explanation?" and at the same time he was aware of the unreasonableness of this thought. He did not follow the inspector into the bedroom and bathroom, but walked idly to the right-hand window, standing, had he but known it, where Jane had stood so often. His feeling for her, newly realized, had, as he himself would have phrased it, knocked him off his feet. He was conscious of her as he had never been conscious of her before, not even in the old days when he had held her in his arms and felt himself between her and the world. He

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turned from the window, and, with the instinct to move and do something, walked, to the settee and moved one of the cushions. It was crooked, and he had the straight eye of the games-playing man. A tiny edge of white showed where the back of the settee met the seat. Half mechanically he picked up a small white handkerchief, and immediately came broad awake. Four inches square, made of veined linen. How many times had he teased Jane about her handkerchiefs.

He called Swimerton sharply, and held out his big hand with the ridiculous thing on the palm.

The inspector took it, turned it over.

"No mark, sir," he said.

"It's Miss Bainwright's, I swear it is."

Florence raised an angry voice.

"Really Major Oakers, what next? Half the women I know use these handkerchiefs. What utter nonsense!"

Inspector Swimerton shrugged his shoulders. "Let's get on," he said without emotion. He passed into the corridor but Walter touched Florence on the arm and held her back for a moment.

"Miss King, you're angry, and perhaps have a right to be angry," he said rather gruffly. "I won't say you haven't, but if you do know anything about Jane -- Miss King, it's a rotten game, I mean Jane's so damned plucky, you know."

He broke off, oppressed with the sense of failure to say what was in his mind and of failure, utter failure to move this woman with the hard flushed face and angry eyes.



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"I don't know what you mean. I think you're mad," said Florence.

The search went forward. They passed from room to room, and, having finished with the house to its last cellar, they tramped through the dark garden, inspected the empty garage, and peered into glass houses and potting sheds. In the end they drove away carrying with them the little handkerchief and the memory of Florence's face.

At the crossroads Walter drew up.

"What do you make of it, Swimerton?" he said, and the inspector said he didn't make very much of it anyway. The man at Ledington *thought* that there were two ladies in the car. He recognized Miss King, and *thought* that there was some one with her. "You *think* you've found Miss Bainwrights handkerchief. There's a deal too much *thinking* about the whole thing."

He was silent for a moment and then said: "You don't like Miss King. If I may say so, sir; and naturally that makes you think worse of her than you would on the evidence alone. I don't like her either, but — well, facts are what we want, and, if you'll be so good as to drive me into Ledington, I'll see if I can check some of her statements. I want to know if the chauffeur really went in there to get a prescription made up, and one or two things like that. I'll poke around and come up by train if you want to get back."

"All right."

But as they parted at Ledington, Walter had a word to say.

"Evidence or no evidence, that woman's a wrong 'un," he said. "Take it from me, Swimerton, she's

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a wrong 'un through and through, and I'm dead sure she knows something—dead sure of it."

The conviction grew as he drove alone, mile after mile of dark wet road slipping away behind the car. Lonely roads at first, then houses, lights and the intersecting bus lines and then the packed life of outlying London.

He was driving slowly along a crowded thoroughfare, now waiting his turn in a jam, now edging ahead of some lumbering truck, when, there on the dirty pavement under the glare of the street light, he caught sight of a face he knew. It was a dreamy face under an old felt hat. The round blue eyes looked directly at him. Walter Oakers uttered a wordless exclamation, ran his car in to the side of the avenue, pulled up, and jumped out, all in the space of a minute. He came up with the dawdling figure a couple of yards from where he had stopped the car. The man had his back to him. Walter, breathless with excitement, laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Ralph Sanders!" he said.

## CHAPTER XIX

Lazare had made very good time into Ledington and back. He took the Upper Elvery road, and as he drew up under the hedge, just short of where the footpath across the fields ended in an old-fashioned stile, he reckoned that he had ten minutes to spare, even if Jane made better time than he thought possible.

He meant to wait for her in the road, but on second thought considered that their little explanation had better take place in some less exposed place. He therefore switched off his lights, crossed the stile, move a pace or two to the right, and leaning against the trunk of an elm, became, in his dark livery, invisible among the shadows. He felt, as he waited, no ennui, but the rising excitement of the gambler who awaits the fall of some decisive card. He had played boldly in letting Jane go. Jane might turn back. She might suspect Florence and do anything but follow her instructions. Also she might meet some one. To be sure there were risks, and he took them with his eyes open. What, he wondered, was taking place at the house. Florence — to have to use a woman like that! What a fatality, and yet no one else would serve. He hoped she would not do anything of a folly too outrageous. He shrugged his shoulders over Florence King. What a woman! Thank heaven, the affair would soon be

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finished. His thoughts began to busy themselves with the future.

Jane came slowly through the darkness. She could no longer see her way. She felt the muddy path under her feet and trudged on. If she stepped on grass she stopped and felt for the mud again. A mist had risen and hung a few feet above the fields. She had the feeling that she was wading in some cold, impalpable stream, between shores that hid strange dreams. A night bird called harshly and was silent again and from far overhead she heard the beat of its wings.

At last Lazare heard her coming, slowly, slowly, and he moved to the very edge of the dense shadow and waited for her there. She did not see the stile or know that it was there until she struck her knee against one of the wooden bars. Then she cried out — such a faint little cry and immediately Lazare had hold of her. His right arm about her shoulders pinioning her and his left hand choking the little faint cry almost before it was uttered.

Jane felt nothing. The shock was too great, and she too near the end of her endurance. She did not faint, but the capacity of feel and emotion were gone. She was aware only of external things, that Lazare's arm was like a vice about her shoulders, that it was difficult to breathe with his hand over her mouth. Lazare's arm tightened its hold about her shoulders. He was going to lift her over the stile, and then suddenly the lifting movement stopped. They stood linked together listening.

A hum that grew in volume, a faint glow that

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turned to glaring whiteness, and with a roar a large car was seen rapidly approaching them. Jane felt herself half lifted, half dragged behind the elm trunk against which Lazare had leaned. She felt this still in that queer surface way, and knew, if she could but scream or do anything to attract attention, that here was help and safety. With a roar and flash, the large car flew on up the road. She had not moved or even tried to scream. She knew that she had lost her chance and the knowledge did not move her at all.

Lazare waited until the noise had completely died in the distance. Then he proceeded to gag Jane very neatly, using a folded linen handkerchief and a silk scarf. He also tied her wrists and ankles with strips of cloth. Carrying her over the stile and down the road a few yards, he set her down in a corner of the car, after which he lit his lights and drove slowly down the road.

Lazare drove briskly for about half an hour, choosing unfrequented byways. At the end of half an hour he turned and drove back, slowing down at the four corners just above Charwood. He looked back into the car where Jane sat motionless then across the trees to where lights showed in the lonely house. One high, uncurtained window blazed against the sheer blackness of the night. He gave a satisfied nod and drove on.

The door in the hall was ajar. Florence met them on the threshold.

"Lazare, Lazare, he's come, — he's here," she whispered and as Lazare pressed on up the stairs she followed, making desperate attempts to attract

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his attention. He took no notice until he had laid Jane down on the settee in Miss Eliza's sitting room. Then he turned an impatient face.

"What is it? Here, help me to get this gag off," and he bent over Jane.

"Lazare, — he's here!"

"Who is here?"

"Le Noir!"

Lazare's hand stopped moving. He said, "So," in an expressionless voice, and then "Where?"

"In the drawing room. He wants to see you."

"Naturally."

He folded up the handkerchief and scarf and rose to his feet. "Untie her hands and feet. Then you'd better give her some soup. Stay here with her until I send for you." He went out and Florence cut the strips of cloth from about Jane's wrists and ankles, gently placed a cushion under her head, and went across the passage to send Nadine for the soup.

When she returned Jane's eyes were open. They looked at her, at first without any expression at all. Gradually the look changed, and Florence wished that Jane would shut her eyes. She was thankful when Nadine came with the cup of hot soup. Jane drank it very slowly. When it was finished she turned her eyes full upon Florence's face, and said in a soft, bewildered voice:

"Why did you?"

Florence did not answer, but looked the other way.

"Why did you?" repeated Jane slowly.

"Jane dear, you had better not talk," pleaded Florence.

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The eyes began to accuse her. She could not evade them.

"You did — why did you?"

"I — I don't — know what you mean, Jane dear."

"Oh, yes you do; but after all — what does it matter?"

Jane put her head on the pillow and shut her eyes. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered very much. Time went on. Then suddenly Florence's tears falling hot upon her hand, and Florence's voice choked with sobs.

"Jane dear, you'll do what they want you to. Oh, you must dearie. I know you don't trust me now, but, Jane, you must. They mean to make you. They'll do awful things, and you'll have to give in to them in the end."

Something pierced Jane's numb indifference. She would have to give way in the end. That was fear. That thought itself was fear. She turned wild eyes on Florence King, and then, as words of appeal trembled on her lips, the door opened and Lazare came in.

"You are to come down," he said, speaking roughly. "Can you walk?"

Jane got to her feet, holding to Florence's arm. As she walked she let go of it, and by dint of clutching the balustrade she came down the stairs.

In the hall she paused. Lazare opened the drawing-room door.

"In here," he said, and they passed in Florence first, then Jane and last of all Lazare. He shut the door, and, going over to the long table, about which chairs had been placed, sat down. Florence guided Jane to a chair and took one beside her. In

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the middle of the table, beneath the lamp, rose red against the dark mahogany, was the lacquer case. Jane saw it and for a moment could see nothing else. When she at last lifted her eyes from it she was aware of Florence on her right and Lazare on her left. Beyond Florence, Nadine, and on the farther side of Lazare, Sascha, and immediately opposite, sitting alone at the head of the table, a lean man with long hands hidden by black kid gloves, and a face hidden by a black mask that covered him from brow to chin. Above the mask a black skull cap, similar to those worn by priests. The gloved hands were folded upon the table.

"This, Miss Bainwright," said Lazare, "is M. Le Noir. He has come to see the affair finished. The lacquer case is as you see, before you upon the table. You will now open it."

Jane did not reply. She was counting the fishes and the roses on the case. There were three fishes and six roses. It was the third fish that one pressed, the third fish and the fifth rose. It would be very easily done.

"You will open it, and you will play no tricks. If you bungle and spoil the paper, you may be very sure that we shall kill you. You are too intelligent not to see that, I am sure. If you give us the paper you are compromised sufficiently and we can let you go with safety to ourselves, but, unless you are compromised, we can never let you go. I am sure you see that. Now you will open the case?"

He took it up as he spoke and laid it before her. Jane looked away from it. She looked at



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Sascha, but his eyes were downcast and his dark young face sullen. He suffered, but he was terribly afraid. Jane stopped looking at him.

"Come, open it!" said Lazare in a commanding voice. He tapped the table, paused, and, bending to Jane's ear, he whispered a single sentence, a single threat.

Those around the table heard no word of what he said, but the surface quiet and indifference of the whole circle was violently broken.

Jane screamed once, not loudly, but on a dry, hoarse note. The sound brought Sascha to his feet trembling like a startled animal, his hands gripping the table, his dark eyes wide and blank.

Lazare said, "Sit down, you fool!" his voice a dead monotone, and the boy dropped back into his chair, still holding to the table edge.

Nadine looked scornful. Florence's mouth fell open, giving her a vacant look. Le Noir did not move. Eyes, hands and mask — all remained like a black picture painted on a background of dense shadow. Jane did not scream again. She shivered from head to foot and woke up. The dazed indifference which had shut her in went with a crash like ice that gives to a sudden thaw. She did not feel cold or tired or weak any more, but strong, vital and intensely conscious. No more drifting with the stream of encompassing thought, no more quiescence. She was suddenly shocked broad awake into an intense consciousness of her danger and of a courage that rose to meet it. She sprang suddenly to her feet and cried in a clear, ringing voice:

"What fools you are — what utter fools! Don't

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you see when you're beaten? Don't you understand that nothing, absolutely nothing will make me give you that formula!"

The eyes in the black picture that was Le Noir shifted a point. Their gaze had been upon Jane. They shifted to the right and rested on Lazare. They conveyed without words a faintly ironic impression as who should say: "Is this the girl broken down — at the yielding point?"

Lazare stared back, cold and deadly. Into the momentary hush came the loud pealing of the front door bell.

## CHAPTER XX

There was not much that was admirable about Lazare, but he possessed the coolness and courage that dominate an emergency and pass without conscious effort into rapid and effective action.

Before Jane could scream his hand was on her mouth and, while he held her, struggling this time like a wild thing trapped, he spoke in his usual tone of command.

"It is probably the inspector — I ought to have expected it. Sascha, you will take Le Noir out by the back way? Wait with him in the shed until I send you word. Florence, you will help me to get her upstairs. They are not likely to search again, but be prepared. Take the lacquer case, Nadine, and put it in the old lady's room in a drawer; they will not look for it among her things. After that you will open the door. If it is the inspector or Major Oakers, Miss King is engaged. If he asks for the chauffeur show him in here and come and tell me."

Jane had stopped struggling as soon as she found that it was not possible to wrench herself free. Instead she let herself go limp all over and hung a dead weight upon Lazare's arm. That horrible gag again, but no use to struggle, better let him think she had given in or fainted. The thoughts flashed through her mind and it remained clear, receptive, ready to seize upon the chance.

The bell was ringing a second heavy peal as they carried her through the hall, Lazare going at a steady pace, Florence shaking, trembling, in a

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dumb terror, but fearing Lazare more than she feared the law. They took her into the old room. Then Lazare said: "the bathroom. Open the door and set the taps going. Splash and make a noise. Lock yourself in with her until I come. Do you understand? I'll kill you if you blunder, you foolish woman."

All so gently spoken, Florence nodded, speechless. They laid Jane on the black and white tile floor and Lazare went out. Florence's shivering fingers were already on the taps. The water flowed with a pleasant gurgle, the little room began to fill with steam. Florence shot the bolt, and sitting down on the edge of the tub began to cry. Jane's wide, clear eyes watched her. She felt pity for this foolish woman.

Downstairs Nadine had opened the front door. Upon the threshold stood Inspector Swimerton.

"Good evening," he said. "You take a long time to answer bells in this house, don't you?"

Nadine smiled gravely.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," she said in the good English that yet had such a foreign sound to the inspector's ears. "But I was with the old lady, and I could not leave in a hurry. She does not like hurry."

This was a long speech for Nadine, but the inspector was not to know that. He thought her a pleasant young woman and not ill-looking, for a foreigner.

"Well," he said, "I thought I'd like to see that chauffeur of yours. I missed him in Ledington. so I came along here after him. I see he's in, as the car is standing outside."

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"Oh, yes, sir. Will you come in? I will tell him, and send him to you. He is in the kitchen eating, I think."

Inspector Swimerton walked into the drawing room and sat down in the chair lately vacated by M. Le Noir. He admired this room and its surroundings. When Lazare came in he looked up sharply and saw a respectful-mannered chauffeur who came to a halt just inside the door and bade him a polite "Good-evening."

"Ah — the chauffeur?"

"Yes, sir."

"You drove Miss King down from London on Wednesday last?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you pick her up?"

"At the club, sir."

"At what hour?"

"At about four forty-five, sir."

"She was alone?"

"No, sir."

"Who was with her?"

"Another lady, a young lady, sir."

"Were you acquainted with her?"

"No, sir."

"Miss King did not mention her name?"

"No, sir. Not that I remember."

"How was she dressed?"

Lazare appeared to be thinking.

"To that I could not say, sir. Something dark, and fur round the neck, I believe. It was foggy, and getting late."

"Well, it doesn't matter. You drove the two ladies down here?"

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

"No, sir."

"Oh, come, come, you were seen driving her through Ledington; you were seen by more than one person."

"It may be. I drove Miss King through Ledington on our way home. The other lady we dropped at the Piccadilly station before we left London."

"At what time?"

"Five o'clock, or perhaps a few minutes after."

The inspector heaved an inward sigh. Duty had urged this second visit, impelled the hire of a car and brought him on this fool's errand. The man sounded all right, well mannered, well set up. Couldn't help being a foreigner nothing else against him. He shut the note book, got up, nodded affably to Nadine in the hall, and heard the door close behind him with feelings of satisfaction. He paused at the door in the hall to light a cigarette, after which he drove off in the direction of Ledington.

Lazare permitted himself to smile. He glanced at the clock and stood with folded arms, waiting until five minutes had ticked themselves away. Then he crossed the hall, opened the door that led to the back premises, and called, "Gregor!"

Instantly the silent man who kindled the fires and did most of the work of the house came to meet him. Lazare spoke to him in a rapid undertone, and, turning away, walked slowly up the stairs. He stopped at Miss King's door and knocked. When Nadine opened it he said in a low voice:

"It's all right. He's gone. Come downstairs. We must talk things over."

## CHAPTER XXI

"Ralph Sanders," said Major Oakers.

Ralph turned, with Walter's hand on his arm and the sound of Walters voice in his ears. A look of surprise was succeeded by one of friendly recognition, which in its turn slowly gave place to an expression of undoubted dismay.

"Major Oakers!" he said. And the, spreading out of both his plump hands, "Alas, you have found me."

"Yes, thank God you are alive! We thought you were dead!" said Walter briefly.

Ralph Sanders looked shocked.

"But how could I be dead? Where, my dear friend, was my corpse?"

"In the — that is, we thought it was in the Smuggler's Leap," said Walter, a little grimly. "You see, we found your fountain pen there and your footmarks on the edge. And Miss Bainwright told us how worried you'd been. And of course we thought — we thought that you had — committed suicide."

Ralph's blue eyes expressed the uttermost reproach and horror.

"What I? A suicide?" he gasped.

"Jane and I didn't believe it," said Walter, partly to stem the flood of apparent reproaches and partly to introduce Jane's name.

Ralph beamed.

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"Jane—she is too intelligent," he said. "She would never believe such a thing, never!"

Walter took Ralph Sanders by the arm and drew him over to the side of the car.

"I want to talk to you?" he said. "Where are you living?"

Ralph Sanders hesitated. He had the air of a child who desires to conceal something.

"My friend," he said at length, "where I live, it is shall I say, a matter of confidence? With your permission I will merely describe it as a place of retirement. I had need of such a place, and one was provided."

"I am very anxious to talk to you," said Walter. "But we can't talk here."

Ralph Sanders considered.

"This road, it is true, is noisy," he said. "You shall drive me in your car to a more retired street. There we can sit and talk."

Walter felt a consuming impatience, but Ralph Sanders appeared serenely unaware of the fact. Walter heard the story of Ralph's midnight walk, of his misery and despair, of the coming of the new idea, and of the way of escape afforded by the opportune motor and its oblivious chauffeur. Ralph described vaguely, but with enthusiasm, the new idea.

"A food for infants, beneficent and nourishing beyond all others. My friend, is not that an idea? To feed, to invigorate the coming race—that is better than to destroy. You say to me that there are already hundreds of foods and each one claims that it has these qualities, but to that I reply: Mine is beyond them all—it is truly novel, truly



## THE RED LACQUER CASE

wonderful—it is better than nature. Ah! Is not that a triumph?"

Walter said nothing. He drove the car on in silence. Now they were in an ill-lit, dingy street, empty from end to end. Here he drew up and turned upon his companion with a purposeful air.

"Now, Ralph Sanders, we will talk," he said. "This is what I want to say to you."

Ralph Sanders interrupted him.

"But my dear friend," he said reproachfully, "do I not talk? Have I ceased to talk since we met? It is, in effect, a long time since I have talked so much."

"I don't mean that sort of talk," Walter's tone was dogged. "I want you to listen to me."

"Very well, my friend, I am all attention."

"Well, Ralph, after you disappeared, Jane told us that you were much troubled about your invention."

"Ah!" said Ralph Sanders. "It does not matter now. You have an excellent and sympathetic heart, but indeed, my good friend, I am no longer troubled about the matter. It is gone into the past. It is for me no more; and, instead, my whole mind, my energies, my intelligence, they are occupied with a new idea, its inception, its development. It is in order to mature this idea undisturbed that I am in a place of retirement."

"Ralph Sanders, will you please listen to me?" said Walter loudly.

"But, my good friend, of course." In the dusk Ralph Sanders was seen to wave his hands with an inviting gesture.

"Jane said that before you disappeared you had

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been bothered with people trying to get hold of your formula. I want to know if that's a fact."

"But yes, it was certainly a fact." He used the past tense as one who speaks of remote events.

"Will you tell me who they were?"

Ralph Sanders hesitated, threw out his hands.

"But to what purpose? The affair is in the past."

"I'm afraid it isn't. I'm afraid I must press for an answer. Who were those people who approached you?"

Ralph became agitated.

"Monsieur, I cannot tell you. It is an affair of confidence. They approach me in confidence. They rely on my honor. I refuse their offers, but I pledge myself to utter secrecy. It is true that I have cause to complain of their conduct. They spy upon me. They will not take my answer. They even threaten. But yet I feel that I did give my pledge. It is an affair of my honor, and I beg that you will not press it."

"But I must press it," said Walter, stubbornly. "The men are criminals. You say they threatened you. I know they threatened Jane. How can you hesitate?"

Ralph became yet more perturbed.

Walter strove for patience.

"Ralph Sanders, the matter is very serious. I ask you for names and facts, not for philosophical discourses."

"But, my dear friend, I am bound, and the affair, as I say, is in the past."

"I wish to heaven it were Ralph, you've got to pay attention! The affair is very far from being

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in the past. The formula has been stolen and Jane has been kidnaped."

"Mon Dieu!" said Sanders excitedly. "What is that you say?"

Walter said it again, putting more emphasis into the words.

"Mon Dieu!" said Ralph Sander. Then with sudden vigor, "Oh, but that is impossible!"

"What is impossible?" said Walter. "Do you mean that the formula isn't stolen or that Jane hasn't been kidnaped?"

"My good friend," said Ralph Sanders, most unfairly, "Please calm yourself. Tell me what has occurred. Why do you say that the formula is stolen?"

It was too dark to see Ralph's face, but his voice held an odd inflection.

Walter groaned inwardly. The whole thing was like a nightmare. Why should he be holding an apparently endless conversation with a lost uncle in a dark street that smelt of burnt cooking.

"Because," he began, and then, as if suddenly enlightened, "Oh, I say, do you mean that it isn't — that you took it with you? Because, if you did, it would mean —"

The idea almost knocked him off his feet. Why, it would mean that Jane was all right, that Jane was safe. He caught Ralph by the arm and almost shouted, "Jane, is she with you? She said — I mean the telegram said so, only we thought it was a fake. Is she, is she? Oh, for goodness sake, do say something."

"My good friend," began Ralph Sanders. Then he paused, coughed and said uncertainly: "Jane?"

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What is all this about Jane and telegrams? With me? But, no, my friend, how could she be?"

"Then it was a fact," groaned Walter and relinquished his hold upon Ralph Sanders arm.

"Go on about the formula," he said. "You are sure you didn't take it with you?"

"Of course I am sure. I left a letter for Jane, and in it I told her that the red lacquer case was in the bookcase. I told her behind which book she would find it, and all the decision of whether to use or to destroy it I left in her hands. They are small, Jane's hands, but of the most capable."

"We know that much," said Walter. "We looked there, — but the case was gone."

"Impossible! You are sure?"

"It was gone and now Jane's gone too."

"Mon Dieu! And when did Jane go?"

"On Wednesday!" and Walter groaned out the story of the woman in the gray tweed driving coat, who had, as he put it, come bothering Jane on Monday, and how she had gone up to town on Wednesday and disappeared. He told of the faked telegrams and of his fruitless search for Jane, and at the end Ralph took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair.

"But it was on Wednesday that I saw Jane," he remarked, and felt Walter grip his arm again.

"When? — Where did you see her?"

"In the road over there, near to where you met me. I had gone out to take the air, to think, to dream, and all of a sudden like a flash I saw Jane."

"Who — where?"

"In a car. It went slowly because of the traffic, and the light of a street lamp it shone in right

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upon Jane's face. I think she had been asleep. She blinked and looked at me, and I think to myself, 'Aha, now you are caught.' And then the car moves on and they are gone again."

"Which way was it going?"

"How can I say? It came from London, however."

"About what time was it?" The words hurried from Walters lips.

"Ah, but my good friend, when I work the time is nothing to me. How do I know?"

"But you say the street lamps were lighted. It must have been after dark."

"Yes, yes, it was dark."

"Have you no idea what time it was?"

"None whatever, my good friend, none."

"The car, what kind of a car was it?"

"It was a car."

"Yes, yes, — so you said; but what make?"

"I cannot say to that. To me they are all alike."

"Was it a limousine?"

"My good friend, I tell you I do not know one car from another."

Walter's jaw dropped. That there should exist a human being whose intelligence was so low as not to be able to distinguish one car from another simply staggered him.

"Oh, — I say!" he said.

"Yes?" Ralph Sanders was all polite attention "What is it you say?"

But Walter said nothing. He was speechless. He began to put in some rapid thinking. Sanders was no help to him, absolutely none. No use wasting more time on him. But he had seen Jane, it

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was obvious that he had seen Jane, and in spite of his vagueness it was also quite obvious that he had seen her driving in the Ledington direction after dark and at a point at least five miles distant from Piccadily.

He experienced an instant and overwhelming desire to get back to Ledington, to find the inspector if possible, but anyhow to get back to Ledington. He felt furiously incensed with Ralph Sanders. What business had he to lay Jane open to these risks? Why couldn't he settle his own affairs with his own conscience? And not even to know one car from another. He had at that moment no use for inventors, absolutely none at all.

"My friend," said Ralph Sanders at this auspicious juncture, "you appear to me to be troubled. If it is about Jane, I beg of you not to be uneasy. For me, I am persuaded that if Jane has gone away it is for some very good reason. Reflect! You thought me dead. Am I, therefore, dead? Not at all. I have merely retired myself that I may have some peace in which to work. In my judgement it is so with Jane. She has retired herself. She plays a trick. Presently she will laugh at you."

At this moment Walter lost his temper so thoroughly that his subsequent recollection of the terms in which he expressed himself was rather vague. It is, however, certain that he was extremely rude to the astonished Ralph Sanders, that their parting was of a very abrupt nature, and that, a little later on four different policemen called to him to cut down his speed, but without

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success. He was driving madly in the direction of Ledington.

Ralph Sanders, for his part, resumed his interrupted walk. As he wandered slowly and meditatively among the crowds that hurried, pushed and jostled, his thoughts resumed their philosophic calm.

"That is a worthy young man, of a rash and impulsive temper, but worthy. That he loves Jane is apparent even to me, who am not observant in such matters. It is also his excuse. By this time he doubtless regrets his hasty words and his discourteous departure."

He continued to walk, gazing dreamily at the passersby. Presently a strange little smile covered his face.

"The red lacquer case — the formula," he murmured. "I wonder — very much — I — wonder."

## CHAPTER XXII

Jane lay **very** still. The tile was rather cold. The air in the little bathroom was heavy with steam. The sound of running water and the sound of Florence's voice went on continuously.

Florence had not moved. She sat on the edge of the bath tub, twisting her hands and talking in a low monotone that was not at all like her usual voice.

"Jane dear, I can't help it. You know that I can't help it, don't you dearie? I don't know what to do, I don't, indeed I don't. If I could help it I would. — Lazare says — and I must believe him — you do see that, don't you? If I didn't believe what he says everything could go. You must see that, Jane. You couldn't expect me to let everything go like that. Jane, don't look at me like that. I'm doing it for the Cause, for the Cause and for Lazare. And what is one individual when the whole of humanity is at stake? I have to think of that. You must see that I have to think of that; you must, Jane, you must."

The water went on running. Florence's voice went on. Then footsteps, a loud insistent knocking on the door, Lazare's impatient voice:

"It is I — open the door."

Florence shivered, drew the bolt with a jerk and let him in. He remained on the threshold, threw Jane a glance that noted her unchanged position, and said:



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"She has not tried to move?"

Florence shook her head.

He knelt down and removed the gag. Jane relaxed every muscle. She lay there, her eyes closed, her mouth fallen a little open. Lazare shook her, gripping her shoulder roughly.

"Come out of it, none of that," he said. "Get up."

But when she neither stirred nor answered he picked her up, stood for a moment to bid Florence "Stop that confounded water running," and then set Jane down on the settee in the sitting room.

"We don't want her just now. She'll come round fast enough when we do. Florence, it is you we want. — Nadine has gone down. We must come to a decision, and how can we do that without you?"

He put his arm around her as he spoke, felt that she was trembling and spoke soothingly to her as they went out. As soon as Jane heard the click of the bolt she opened her eyes and sat up. The voices died away. The footsteps died away. Jane's hearing, like all her other faculties, was at its most acute. She was aware that a crisis was approaching and that the danger in which she stood was real and imminent, but she was not actually afraid. The emotion that had been fear seemed to have changed, to be stimulating instead of depressing. Something in her tingled at the thought of Lazare and his threat; her head came up and her jaw set firmly. She knew that she would never open the case for them, never give them the formula. The terror lest she should give

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in had passed and with its passing she was strong.

Nadine had gone down. Lazare and Florence were going down. They were going to come to a decision about her, Jane. They would all be downstairs. Jane had in her mind the picture of an empty passage with a door on the right and a couple of yards farther on another door on the left. The door on the right her door, the door on the left the door of old Miss King's room. If — Jane's heart began to beat — if she could only make the old lady hear. She remembered what Florence had said about her aunt — "She doesn't get out of bed, but of course there's no reason why she shouldn't." No reason why she shouldn't — and a terrible insistent hope that she might if she were to hear Jane calling.

As the thought took shape Jane was at the door, her mouth pressed to the crack.

Old Miss King was sitting up in bed. Nadine had left her comfortably propped up with pillows. The room was pleasantly warm. The fire burned clearly. She stroked the head of the white kitten which lay beside her, fast asleep.

It was at this point that she thought she heard some one call her name. She listened intently and she heard it again — "Miss King! Miss — King!" It seemed as though the kitten heard it, too, for he got up, stretched himself, and jumped down from the bed.

"Did you hear it, Felix?" said Miss King. "Did you hear some one calling me? Now that is very singular, I don't know when it happened before, and I don't know who it can be, either."

Felix walked to the door, sat down before it and

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uttered the loud, harsh mew of a pure-bred. The voice kept on calling. Felix turned his head, cast a glance of the utmost reproach at his perturbed mistress and mewed again, louder than before.

As Felix mewed for the third time, old Miss King folded back the bedclothes and cast a guilty look around.

"Felix, there is someone calling me," said old Miss King. "Now who can it be? It cannot be Florence or Nadine for they do not know that I get out of bed when I am alone. Who — can it be?"

She pushed the bed clothes still farther back, put her feet out of bed and sat looking at the door and listening.

"Miss King! Miss King!"

There was no doubt about it, some one was certainly calling her. The voice sounded as if it came from Eliza's room. Who could possibly be in Eliza's room? It couldn't be Eliza. It couldn't be Eliza. Oh, no, it couldn't be Eliza. She would not call her 'Miss King'. She would say, 'Martha dearest,' Old Miss King's eyes filled with tears. Who could possibly be in Eliza's room? She stood up, holding to the bedpost, and then walked slowly, to the door. Her feet were incased in bed socks of lamb's wool so that she did not feel the need of slippers.

Felix mewed for the fourth time. He also looked at her angrily and patted the door with a white furry paw. The minute that it was open he stalked majestically into the passage. The old lady followed him.

There was some one in Eliza's room.

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

"Miss King! Miss King!"

Miss King came slowly toward the sound. The passage was rather cold. She looked over her shoulder at the warm glow which shone from the open door of her room. The passage was also dark. She hated the cold and the dark, but she would just see who was in Eliza's room before she went back to her warm bedroom.

She reached the door, rested her left hand on the jamb, and with her right tapped upon the nearest panel, making the faintest of faint sounds, and listening tremulously for a response.

Jane, leaning against the inner side of the door, had heard each stage of the old lady's approach, the click of the latch, Felix's mew, the shuffle of Miss King's feet in the wooly bed socks; each of these sounds was more beautiful to her than music.

When that mere whisper of a tap brushed the other side of the panel against which she leaned Jane's sharply indrawn breath answered it. Her voice would not come for a moment and she heard Miss King give a little whimpering cry.

"Oh, dear. Oh, dear," and then—"Is there any one there?"

"Yes, yes," breathed Jane, trying to keep the thread of sound steady and controlled.

She heard Miss King's hand slide on the panel. She heard her give a deep sigh.

"Oh, my dear, who is it?"

Jane got her voice clear. "I'm locked in. Will you undo the bolt, dear Miss King?"

"The bolt?"

The hand slid and fumbled again, touched the bolt, and fell away.

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

"Ooh! It's so cold."

"Please, please, Miss King. Open the bolt. Let me out."

Once more that slow groping, but this time the bolt moved, creaked faintly, and slid back.

Jane's hands gripped each other.

"The other one — it's lower down. Will you open it? Please open it, Miss King."

"My dear, I think — I think I must be going back to my bed. The passage — it strikes rather cold."

"The other bolt, please, dear Miss King. The — other bolt." whispered Jane. "Then I'll help you into bed."

Felix was rubbing and purring about his mistress' ankles. She felt sufficiently encouraged to bend a little and push back the second bolt.

The next moment the door was open. Jane and Miss King stood looking at each other, with Felix purring between them.

"I'll — take — you — back — to your — room" Jane had to force the words, but they finally came.

But Miss King shuffled past her into the room.

"I'm afraid I'm rather forgetful, my dear. Do I know your name?"

"My name is Jane. Dear Miss King, won't you let me help you back to bed. It is much too cool for you here."

"Yes, yes. All in good time," she replied smiling. "There is no hurry. Young people are so impatient."

Jane took the old lady firmly by the arm.

"Miss King, you must come back to bed," she said. Bending forward, she whispered: "What if

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

somebody were to come up and find you here?"

"Oh, yes, yes. Very well thought of, my dear, and, you are quite right, it is cold here."

She watched Jane fasten the bolts again, and as she led her to her room, inquired: "But, my dear, why do that."

Jane did not answer. She piloted Miss King safely into her own room, deposited her in her bed, and tucked her in.

"Now I must go," said Jane, desperately.

"One moment, please. Why must you go? People keep going away all the time, Florence and Nadine, and that very large, pleasant young man who said his name was Oakers. He reminded me a little of my cousin Dale, who went off to South Africa and was never heard of again."

"Did you—did you say Oakers?" said Jane hardly breathing.

"No, my dear," said Miss King, "It was he who said Oakers. He stood there just inside the door, looking quite immense, and I said to him, 'Do I know you, my dear:' and he said, 'My name is Oakers.' And then he admired Felix and came over and stroked his head."

"When was this?" whispered Jane, "When?"

"Just after tea," said Miss King placidly. "Nadine had taken away the tray, and the man came to see about the electric lights, though I didn't know there was anything wrong, with them."

Jane's heart beat violently. Walter was looking for her! Walter — had been here!

Like a flash it came to her. That was why they had let her go. It was a cruel trick to get her out of the way; and Walter had come and gone,

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

and had not found her. Just for a moment her heart failed her a little; and then she was strong again.

"I'm awfully sorry," she said. "But I must go, Miss King, and don't tell any one you've seen me. You don't want them to know you got out of bed, do you?"

Miss King shook her head with astonishing vigor. — Then she took Jane's hand and gently pressed it.

"Please come again, dear, soon. And before you go, if you would fetch me a clean handkerchief from the chest of drawers, the left hand side of the top drawer. That's a dear."

Then Jane remembered. It was just as if Lazare were standing in the room, the sound of his voice came so plainly to her ears. She heard it again as she had heard it when he bade Nadine take the red lacquer case into the old lady's room and hide it there. "They won't look for it in her room," he had said.

Jane dropped the hand and ran across the room towards the chest of drawers that stood facing the door. With trembling hands she began to open the drawers, and feel hurriedly, but as thoroughly as possible among the contents. As Jane opened the middle drawer, Miss King's fluttering voice reminded her that the handkerchiefs were in the top drawer, left hand side.

As Jane felt about toward the back of the drawer, her anxious fingers touched something hard. Carefully she moved some of the linens aside, and there resting among the sheets and white linens reposed the lacquer case. She took it

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

out very carefully, so that Miss King might not discover the act.

What next? Where was she to go now? Every second mattered now. Instantly, and before an answering thought could shape itself, there came the sound of running feet. Some one coming up the stairs, running quickly and lightly, with the sound of a high heel tapping the steps.

Jane spun round, the hand with the lacquer case behind her. Miss King's eyes were round with dismay, her mouth puckered open with an "oh!" of frightened breath.

There was no time to get away. No time to pass the stair head unseen. No chance at all really, but a desperate one that must be taken. As these thoughts came Jane had the dressing-room open, was on the threshold, her eyes imploring those vague blue ones that watched her from the bed.

"Don't tell. They mustn't know," she breathed, and closed the door with her left hand. The right hand still held the lacquer case. She leaned against the shut door. The room was in total darkness. She heard the running feet across the threshold of Miss King's room, and stood rigid, listening,—listening. She heard Miss King say "Nadine," and waited for what would come next. The footsteps came quickly across the room. Jane would not move a finger. If Nadine were to open the door she would find her. She was coming straight toward it. She was going to open it. — "Ah!" Jane took a long, long breath, the footsteps stopped short. She heard the jerk of the drawer in the middle of chest of drawers, she



## THE RED LACQUER CASE

knew it was the middle one because of the trouble she had in opening it, it made the same noise now as for her. She knew what it was that Nadine had come running upstairs for. She had been sent for the lacquer case. And the case was not there. It was here, in Jane's hand. She could feel the little raised fishes and roses as she held it. She thrust it deep into the pocket of her coat. At last Nadine had the drawer open, there was a startled exclamation, then Nadine's voice hard, insisting.

"Who has been in this drawer?"

Old Miss King could see what Jane could not see. She looked at Nadine with the red patch on either cheek, the blazing suspicion in her hard eyes and she began to tremble and to whimper softly, taking little distressed breaths and fidgeting with the sheet.

"Who has been to this drawer?" demanded Nadine, coming a quick step nearer the bed. "Have you been out of bed? Have you been to the drawer? Tell me quick, have you?"

Poor Miss King began to cry. The tears rose singly and, overflowing, rolled down her smooth pink cheeks one by one. She made no effort to wipe them away.

"No, no, no, oh — dear me, no," she said, and then said it again, and again.

"Well, who has been in here? Tell me at once, who has been in here? Who has been going through that drawer?"

Nadine raised her hand, took the old lady by the shoulder and said:

"Stop it now, and tell me who has been here?"

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

She spoke low and furiously. Miss King only broke into more pitiful sobs.

"No, no, oh dear me, no," she gasped, and Nadine, suddenly releasing her, sprang for the door. She left it wide open behind her. Jane heard the sound of her flying feet, the tap of the high-heeled shoes as she whirled downstairs.

There was just one minute. Nadine had gone to Lazare with the news and in a minute they would all be here, these skilled and desperate searchers. Before Nadine had reached the stairhead Jane was out of the dressing room. She put her fingers on her lips, ran to the farther door and like a flash passed from warmth and light, into the visible dusk of the passage.

What light there was came from the stairhead on the left and from Miss King's open door behind her. The light from the stairs was no more than twilight, reflected from the lights in the hall below. Jane heard the drawing room door flung open, caught the blurred sound of voices and ran on tip toe as far as the top of the stairs. For one breathless moment she leaned over the smooth rail and wondered if it were possible, just barely possible, to reach the halfway landing; but immediately the vague noises from below rose in a sharp crescendo, a chair fell with a crash and even as Jane drew back shuddering the hall was full of people and excited angry voices.

On the other side of the stairhead a second passage showed, Jane did not know where it led to, but she ran for the darkness and the shelter she hoped it would afford. She ran with her hands stretched out before her, groping along the

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wall, the fingers of her right hand slipping on the wall paper. There was a clatter of footsteps and a hum of voices behind her, coming nearer. Then her hand touched the jamb of the door. Running her hand downward she felt for the door handle, found it and turned it, and quickly slipped into a dark and unknown room. The door opened outward, the handle on the side nearest the stairs. Jane left a crevice open and stood there with the dark all round her, looking through the narrow crack. She could see the landing, vague in the dim light, and three figures at the top of the stairs. Then with startling suddenness, the whole scene sprang into light as Lazare switched on the lights.

He stood on the top step, Nadine beside him and Florence on the step below. They were all talking at once. Sascha and Le Noir were nowhere to be seen. The passage into which Miss King's room opened was now lighted from end to end. Lazare stood for a second, his eyes searching it. They dwelt upon the door of Miss Eliza's room, and Jane thanked heaven that she had remembered to fasten the bolts. As Jane watched Nadine stepped forward, followed by Florence, and with Lazare bringing up the rear, they passed down the passage and through the open door into Miss King's room.

## CHAPTER XXIII

Miss King was still sitting exactly as Nadine had left her, the large, slow tears rolling over her pink cheeks and making a damp path on the shawl about her shoulders.

Florence went directly up to the bed, and leaned over and kissed her, patted the trembling hands and spoke soothingly, whilst Nadine and Lazare stood just inside the door and watched. Nadine's foot tapped impatiently, Lazare quiet and controlled.

"Aunt Martha," said Florence, "dear little auntie, tell me, did you get out of bed just now? Did you, dear?"

"No, no, oh, dear me, no!" sobbed Miss King. "I don't know why you ask that, dear."

"Now, listen dear auntie don't worry. There's no harm if you did get out for a while. But tell me, dear, did you open the third drawer in the chest of drawers and take my—my—card case from it? It was a red one—rather pretty too—with fishes and roses on it. Did you take it out wishing to play solitaire?"

Miss King stopped sobbing and sniffed, turning her blue eyes directly on Nadine.

"No I did not, but she mussed up the linens," she said, evenly, looking reproachfully at Nadine all the time. "She mussed up the drawer, and you know how particular I am about the linens."

Jane, looking through the crack of her door, had

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

seen them go into Miss King's room. They left the door open behind them. Already she knew what she must do, what she must try to do; knew also how small a chance she had of succeeding. She must get down the stairs now, at once, while they were in Miss King's room. She had quite a clear picture of what would happen in a minute. One or the other of the three in Miss King's room would go to the other room, and find it empty. Discover that she had vanished. At once the house would be searched from cellar to attic. If she could only get down stairs and out of the house before they missed her, then—and only then—there was a very slender chance, otherwise none at all. To leave this dark room and go out into the light, to pass so close to that open door and risk the stairs. It was a great risk for her, but Jane knew it had to be done, and she had already made her decision, was even now as she considered it's slim chances, opening the door. Without giving herself more time to think, Jane ran quickly, lightly, out of the dark room, out into the hall and down the stairs.

Jane reached the turn on noiseless, flying feet, caught the stair rail to steady herself as she swung round, and started down the short half-flight. Here she checked herself for just a fraction of a minute, listening. Good, the voices above her went on. She started downward, and bit deep into her lip. Some one was on the first step, starting to come up from the lower hall, not running or seeming to be in a hurry, but walking heavily with bent head and heavy shoulders. Jane looked again, petrified, unable to continue on downward or to go

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back, she was motionless. Then, as if drawn by her terrified gaze the bent head lifted, a dark, startled face looked up, and Sascha's eyes met Jane's.

Agonized anxiety, agonized protest, that is what each read in the other's eyes. Jane checked a sob and ran down the remaining steps. As she reached the landing Sascha threw out his arm as if to bar the way for her, and she heard from the room above, a sharp startled cry.

What was she to do? There was no going on,—there was no going back!

The drawing room door was not a yard away. Jane made a mad rush for it, reached it, ran in, and when she was about to close it behind her, found Sascha on the threshold. He came in quickly, pushed the door to; and they stood in the dark, breathing hard, and heard a step go past and up the flight beyond. Then Jane breathed his name and felt him quiver, they were standing so close together.

"Help me," she said, "Sascha, please help me!"

Her groping hand found his and clung to it, and the pressure pleaded as her whispering voice had pleaded. Sascha shuddered from head to foot and was silent. The hand that Jane held was as cold as ice. Then, like a person in a dream, he put out the other hand and turned on the light.

The lights flashed into brilliance. The heavy curtains, the massive furniture, everything in the room seemed to rush into sight. Jane almost screamed. It was so sudden.

Her hand dropped from Sascha's, she fell back a pace. And then he was close to her again, whisper-

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ing in her ear,— agitated and incoherent:

"Jane, if they find you, you are lost. I can do nothing, and I suffer. You say, 'Help me,' No one can help you Jane, unless you do as they say."

"Put out the lights," said Jane quickly.

"No, no, it is the only chance. You say, 'Help me,' Jane I will do my very best. If the room is dark, they suspect at once; but if there is light, if I practice here, it may be— see, my violin, there on the piano. I must play, but my hand—it shakes so."

"Yes, yes, I see what you mean. Play quickly."

As she spoke a door slammed violently upstairs. Jane darted across the room, parted the rose colored drapes, and letting them fall together behind her, she threw up the window with desperate hands. It creaked and moved stiffly. She leaned out. A long drawn wail from Sascha's violin seemed to fill the room behind her.

It was Le Noir who had gone upstairs. He did not hurry himself but came at an even pace to the stairhead and looked along the lighted passage. The door of Miss Eliza's room was standing wide open and from within came the sound of voices. He walked slowly past Miss King's room, going straight toward the room where the others were gathered.

As he approached the door, Lazare came out to meet him, deadly pale.

"She's gone," he said sharply.

Le Noir surveyed the scene; Nadine, with that unaccustomed patch of red high on the cheek bone; Florence limp and tearful; Lazare extraordinary pale: trailing from a chair, Jane's gray fur, and,

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fallen on the ground near the settee, her little black velvet beret.

"How?" he asked.

It was Nadine who answered him, her voice shrill with rage.

"It was the old woman. She must have got out of bed and let her out. So much for this fool who says she cannot walk, she never gets out of bed." She glared at Florence as she spoke, and said, "Fool!" again viciously.

Florence sobbed and Lazare spoke.

"She's taken the case," he said.

Le Noir put a hand on his arm, moved a pace or two aside, and spoke in such a manner that no word reached anyone except Lazare. Then he turned and went back by the way that he had come, and without the least sign of hurry. In the hall he glanced at the clock before taking the back way out of the house. He crossed the garden and the patch of woodland, found the gap in the hedge and climbed down into the lane.

A small two-seater car stood there close in under the trees.

Le Noir took off his skull-cap, mask and gloves, assuming in their stead, cap, goggles and a leather driving coat. Then he drove away. The address at which he subsequently arrived would very much have interested Inspector Swimerton. Lazare, left behind, took command of the situation. He turned first to Florence.

"Find Gregor. Tell him not to leave the foot of the stairs. Send Sascha here. She cannot have reached the first floor. There was not time." And as she made haste to obey, he spoke to Nadine.



## THE RED LACQUER CASE

"You and I must search the house room by room. Lock each door and take the key. She must be found. She is not where we left her, she is not in these rooms. Take the other passage while I go to the drawing-room. If you call, I shall hear."

"Oh, if I get my hands on her!" said Nadine fiercely, and they hurried out.

In the drawing-room Jane leaned from the window, straining to see, stretching out her hand and feeling along the ledge and below it. The window ledge was wide. She leaned way out. There was ivy growing on the house, and some other vine with a thick woody stem. She crawled farther out onto the ledge, felt for the woody stem where it bent and came up on the far side of the window. Holding on to it with her left hand, she knelt on the ledge, her right hand on the sill. Kneeling like this, she looked into the room and called low but insistently.

"Sascha, come here! Don't stop playing, but come, quickly."

The light struck in between the drapes as he parted them and showed her outside on the ledge leaning on one hand.

"Shut the window, shut it," she whispered, and he dropped on one knee and caught her hand.

"Jane—beloved—you will kill yourself. I am to see your death?"

"I hope not. Oh, for goodness sake, do what you're told, my dear boy. Shut the window, shut it!"

They both heard a light tread on the stairs, and, then close on that, a heavier tread, which meant, Lazare.

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

Sascha choked on a sob and pulled the window down.

The window was between them, between him and his beloved, a thin wall of separation through which he could see her dimly. His heart was full of tears and useless pain.

"Quick, latch it," said Jane thru the glass, and he obeyed, and, turning, pushed through the drapes and heard them go to behind him with a soft swish. He grabbed for the bow he had dropped and placed his violin into position, and began to play the air of a favorite opera.

The heavy step was at the door; Lazare was on the threshold, cold fury in his eyes.

"Is this a time to play?" he said, and came into the room.

Sascha fell back before him.

"What is it?" he stammered.

"She's gone. She's taken the case with her. That's all, and, if you don't hanker after a life in prison, you'll turn to and find her before she gets clear away and brings the police down on us."

"Life! Prison!" gasped Sascha, then his voice failed.

"Yes, abduction is a pretty serious affair if one is caught. Pull yourself together, we'll find her, we must find her. How long have you been in here? Are these windows all locked?"

As he spoke Lazare parted the drapes, letting the light shine upon the catch of the nearest window. Seeing that it was latched, he was passing to the next, when there came to them from outside a tearing sound followed by a thud.

With an oath Lazare sprang to the door and

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

made down the stairs at top speed, calling upon Sascha to follow him.

Jane had not waited for Lazare to burst into the room. As soon as she saw Sascha's hand go to the latch, she gripped the thick but loosely hanging stem in one hand, the close growing ivy with the other, and, feeling with her toes for any slight foothold, swung herself gingerly off the window sill. The thick stem felt horrifyingly loose and brittle. She shifted her grip carefully, and came down a foot or two. She reckoned that the window was not more than twelve or fourteen feet above the ground, fifteen at the most. The ivy, thank goodness, held well, and she gained confidence and let herself down another five or six feet, scared by the rustle of the leaves and the sound of angry voices in the room above. And then, all of a sudden, the ivy stem which she was gripping, tore away from the wall, her foot slipped from its precarious hold, and she fell outward and backward, hardly repressing a cry. Fortunately the distance was not great, and the ground below a newly dug bed. Jane was shaken and frightened, but not hurt, and the fright and the shaken feeling were due not only to the fall but to the sound which followed it. As she lay huddled up on the moist earth and gasped for breath, she heard Lazare's oath and the rush of feet, and in a moment she was scrambling up and running away from the house.

It was dark, but not pitch dark; trees, bushes and walls were blacker than the general gloom. Jane's feet found a path, and she ran for her life. She saw vague shapes of trees, and a dense mass

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

which she believed to be the hedge by way of which Florence had brought her through the woodland, to the land. She was thankful that she had her coat on, and that both coat and skirt were of dark material that would neither rustle nor show up in the dark. As she passed the trees and came to the walk between the high bare hedge she heard the noise of pursuit break out behind her, and, looking over her shoulder, saw the flash of a flash light.

She gained the path, and after a yard or two it turned. The hedge would hide her now until they, too, reached the turn. She ran her fastest, trying to remember how the path went and whether there were turnings in it. She thought there were turnings, but was not sure. Oh, why hadn't she noticed more when she and Florence passed this way?

Oh, here was a turning now, leading off to the right. She passed it by a yard or two and then stopped short, shaken by a new terror. She could hear Lazare behind, running and calling, and in front, coming toward her down the narrow path between the hedges some one else, walking quickly with the firm tread of an active man.

She stopped dead, spun, round, ran back and dived down the turning that led away to the right.

## CHAPTER XXIV

Major Oakers had driven through Ledington at a terrific rate of speed just about the time that Inspector Swimerton was returning Lazare's polite good-night. He whisked past the inspector in a dark lane, without a guess at his identity, and with only a few inches between the two cars.

At the four-cross way above Charwood he halted to consider a plan of campaign. A deep inward conviction that Jane was in danger and that he had turned his back on her had sent him tearing back upon his tracks. He had thought only of getting back at any cost and in the shortest possible time. Now he realized that a plan was really necessary and set about making one.

The front-door approach to the house he had visited before, having been tried and not having proved a striking success, some less obvious method commended itself to his mind. Upon three sides and part of the fourth side the house and garden were surrounded by a high wall. This he had noticed when he and the inspector searched the grounds. But a bit of woodland ran along the back of the property, protected by a high thorn hedge which met the stone wall again lower down, and Walter distinctly remembered that at one point there was a gap in the hedge. He remembered it because he had stood there in the gap for a moment and looked down into the lane below. He did not know how narrowly he had missed see-

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ing Le Noir's car cunningly drawn in under the trees a few yards up the lane; but he remembered the gap and the lane, and it occurred to him, as it had occurred to Le Noir, that it would be a handy place to leave a car and a convenient one at which to enter the property without advertising his arrival. He could then reconnoiter the neighborhood of the house and be guided by what he observed there. This settled, he drove slowly along the ridge above the house looking for the lane which he reckoned should run into the main road somewhere within the next quarter of a mile. He had no difficulty in finding it, for as he felt his way, looking all the while to the right, a bright glare pierced the trees, throwing the branches into ebony relief, and with a grinding of gears a small car pushed up the last steep incline that merged the lane into the highroad. It turned the corner, slid past him in a blinding dazzle, and was gone. M. Le Noir was on his way to town in a tremendous hurry.

Walter Oakers dropped down the lane until he sighted the gap in the hedge, drew up under overhanging trees and, shedding his driving coat and gloves, proceeded to climb the bank and to make an unlawful entry upon the property of Miss Martha King.

This unlawful act did not trouble him in the least. He felt exhilarated, because the same instinct which had driven him back to this spot now told him that he had not come in vain. Jane seemed to be very close to him and she seemed to be needing him, calling to him, trusting him. If, in these circumstances, a man in love is not moved

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to warm exhilaration, he must indeed be slow and dull of spirit. Walter strolled through the woodland very much as if it belonged to him and not to somebody else. He did not at the moment care a fig what the rightful owner might think of his presence. Walter strode across the woodland and entered a graveled path that ran between high box hedges.

When Jane ran, therefore, it was from Walter she ran. A dozen more flying steps and she would have run right into his arms, but those steps were never taken. Instead she fled panic stricken down the dark right-hand turning, and Walter, absorbed in his thoughts of her, never even knew that she had been within his reach.

Lazare had not sighted Jane, but Sascha had, for when Lazare rushed downstairs, Sascha darted to the window, appalled by the thought that Jane had fallen and perhaps been terribly injured. As he stood peering out he saw a dark figure scramble up and run in the direction of the hedge. Jane then was neither killed nor injured and she was making for the gap in the hedge. Lazare would catch her. She had no chance. Lazare would certainly make for the gap, since only by the gap could Jane possibly escape. Jane had no chance at all against Lazare. She would be overtaken, and he, Sascha would have to stand by and see her tortured or worse. He could not bear it. There were things that one could not bear. He choked and hurried after Lazare, stumbling on the stairs because his eyes were hot and misty with tears.

The hall door stood wide open. At the foot of the stairs, Gregor, impassive and silent with folded

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

arms. Sascha pushed past him and ran out and round the house. He could hear Lazare ahead of him, making for the gap. He could see the beam of light from the flash light in Lazare's hand. It shifted from side to side, lighting vividly now a leafless bough, now a bush full of berries, now a space of newly turned earth.

Sascha ran, and thought of life in prison. His heart failed him and he slowed up, almost stopped. He would never play again. His music too would be dead. But Lazare—he would torture Jane. She was so brave she would not open the case just for threats. They would torture her and worse. Prison—his music—Jane—and again his music—fell away into the shadowed background of his mind. There remained only,—Jane.

He lifted up his voice and called hoarsely.

“Lazare! Lazare!”

The beam of light rested, falling across two high black pillars with a lane between them, leafy pillars, each leaf picked out by the intense white glare, the entrance to the walk. Lazare halted just as he was about to enter the path, half turned and called back over his shoulder:

“What is it?”

“Lazare—this way—I saw her,” panted poor Sascha, and Lazare turned, the beam of light slipping from the high bare wall, coming nearer, flashing into Sascha's excited eyes. He put up his arms to shield them and then Lazare had him by the arm.

“You saw her”?

“Yes—from the window!”

“Which way did she go? Speak up!”



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"Round the house, to the front."

"You saw her?"

"Yes,—I saw her. —"

Lazare made for the house.

"Have Nadine take a light and follow the wall up the hill, I will beat down towards the lane. Send Gregor to guard the gap. You had better stay in the hall, and remember,—if you play false, prison may have what is left of you, but you'll reckon with me first!"

"I saw her," gasped Sascha, and between terror and relief saw Lazare swing off to the left and disappear round the side of the house.

He himself made no haste. He stopped and tied a shoe lace, came slowly to within a yard or two of the front door, where he began to run, and arrived in the hall with every appearance of having run himself out of breath.

He delivered his messages, saw Nadine and Gregor depart, after which he sat down on the bottom step of the stairs, a prey to panic.

## CHAPTER XXV

The unconscious Walter meanwhile pursued his way. The dense hedges deadened sound and let no light come through. If Lazare had passed the turn of the path, Walter, would have both heard and seen him. As it was, he heard nothing. The stillness of the early evening had given place to gusts of wind that promised rain. Sascha's voice did not carry any distance, and Major Oakers presently emerged from between the tall box pillars and made his way quietly in the direction of the house.

The house appeared to be fully lighted. The lower window flared light. Walter reached the back of the house and turned to the right. There were the barred windows just above him now, old Miss Eliza's room, the bedroom and bathroom. There was no light in any of them. He stood listening, but could hear no sound, then walked the length of the house and turned the corner. A solitary window showed unlighted on the second floor. It faced up the hill towards the four cross roads, and was, if Walter had but known it, the window of Miss King's dressing-room. He stood and looked at the window thoughtfully. It seemed to be open at the top. He thought it was open, but he was not sure. He went on looking until he could have sworn that it was open.

He advanced to the foot of the wall and laid his hand upon the stem of a very fine tree which was trained against it. Walter found it very conveni-

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ent, it was as easy as walking upstairs. He was correct, the window was open at the top. He pushed the upper half down, and then, putting his arm over the top, pulled up both panes, until he could crawl under them.

The room seemed very dark indeed, dark with the unrelieved gloom of a small place shut in by walls. He groped his way with great caution, and was brought to a halt by a chair which creaked faintly as he touched it.

His feet and hands seemed to swell to an immense size and to become very heavy, as with infinite precaution, he edged forward an inch at a time until one of those over grown hands brushed the panel of a door. He found the handle and stood irresolute for a full minute. Then he turned it, and was horror stricken at perceiving a streak of light shine brightly through the opening at the same time old Miss King's voice said pleasantly, "Come in, my dear." Almost without knowing it, Walter went in.

Miss King gazed at him across the bed, upon which slept the ever present Felix. Miss King opened her mouth to scream. It became quite round, but the sound that should have issued from it did not come. The round open mouth relaxed, the pink face took on first a puzzled, and then a smiling look of recognition.

"Oakers," said Miss King, still fluttering a little. "My dear, you startled me just a little."

"But then, they come and go so," she went on, gazing at him with a confidence which he felt to be touching. "Nadine and Florence, and the man who came to see about the lights, and the chauffeur

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—a man whose manners are deplorable, and the other young lady whose name I forget, they will come and go. All day long they come and go.”

At the mention of ‘young lady whose name I forget’ Walter started.

“The young lady whose name you forget—was it Jane?”

“Yes, yes, that’s it, Jane! She was in Eliza’s room with the door bolted on the outside, such a singular thing when you come to think of it, two bolts fastened on the outside of the door, my dear, and if I had not heard her calling me, why she might be there now.”

Miss King had an air of triumph.

“You—you let her out?” inquired Walter.

“Yes, I got out of bed—oh, my dear, you—you won’t tell any one, will you?”

“No, never; I promise. You let her out?”

Miss King nodded, smiling sweetly, and started off on a resume of some former sweetheart.

By main force Walter edged in with a desperate question: “Where is Jane? Do you know? It’s frightfully important, Miss King! Where is she?”

“She told me not to tell,” whispered Miss King, stroking the long white tail of Felix.

“But she wouldn’t mind your telling me, she really wouldn’t. I want to help her. Where is she?”

The old lady threw him an odd half-timid glance. “My dear, are you attached to this young lady?”

“To Jane? Of course I am. Please, Miss King, where is she?”

Again Miss King gave him that half-timid glance, “but my dear, I don’t know.”

## CHAPTER XXVI

When Jane turned and ran from Walter's advancing footsteps, panic came on her. She no longer groped her way or tried to run wearily; she no longer thought or planned. With a wildly beating heart she fled blindly into the darkness and saw it full of floating sparks of fire. She did not know that the hedge on either side had ceased, or feel that her feet were not upon rough grass. She went faster and faster, her pace increasing by the downward slope of the ground, until suddenly, with a splash, she was ankle deep in ice-cold water and the shock of it brought her to a stand still, trembling and panting.

A gust of wind blew hard and damp against her face. Panic died down. She stood quite still, with the water about her ankles and listened intently. No, there was no sound of pursuit.

Very gently she stepped back out of the water and up onto the rising ground that bordered it. She was on the edge of a fair-sized piece of water. The faint glimmer of it answered the cloudy dusk of the night sky above. All round a blackness that spoke of shrubs and trees.

Jane turned to the left and made for the deep shadow there. She must hide, and then presently, perhaps, she could make her way back to the gap and get away by the lane. When, she came close to the bushes she found that they were growing wild and hanging in branching masses over the

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

water. She moved along, looking for an opening and presently found one. She had to push aside some jutting sprays, and then found, to her surprise, that she was in a narrow pathway which appeared to skirt the lake. The overgrown shrubs had once, no doubt, been neatly kept and clipped, but now they straggled everywhere, sending up young shoots under foot and arching densely overhead. It was dreadfully dark, and very wet under foot. Jane began to feel cold and desolate. This was a horrible black maze and she was hungry, and her feet were wet, and she wanted Walter, oh, most dreadfully she wanted Walter.

Walter Oakers had emerged from Miss King's room and advanced cautiously to the top of the stairs. He was tolerably sure that Jane was not in the house. She must have been found by now unless she had managed to escape into the grounds. The house was deadly still. No footsteps coming and going, no voices. He went cautiously down the stairs as far as the turn, and looked over the balustrade. He could hear the ticking of the hall clock. He was just going to take another step or two when the sound of a groan struck upon his ears. It seemed to come from the hall. After a moment it was repeated. Walter moved carefully, shifting his position until he could see the foot of the stairs, and there, on the bottom step, sat a young man with his head in his hands, groaning.

From the strong draft which was blowing up the well of the stairs, Walter concluded that the front door must be wide open. How to connect the groaning young man and the open hall door at all helpfully with Jane, was not immediately clear.

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It occurred to Walter, however, that exit by the door being barred, he had better once more make use of the dressing room window, and he went upstairs again, two steps at a time.

On the top step he turned his head and saw Florence King standing just where the left-hand passage came out upon the stairhead, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief.

She did not see Walter until he almost ran into her and as she recoiled with a little gasp of surprise he was gone.

His passage through Miss King's room was of the very briefest. The old lady had hardly time to look up from stroking Felix, before the dressing room door had closed upon him.

It was with considerable relief that Walter found himself out of doors again. The house was too much for him. He felt quite definitely that he could not cope any further with the groaning young man, or with Miss King. Being out of doors again felt very good indeed.

He made his way to the front of the house and perceived in the distance the flash of a light away on the left and down the hill. The high wall lay between him and the road and a belt of shrubs followed it. A furlong or two beyond the house and the shrubs were on either side with a narrow gravel path between them. The trees and bushes were wild and ill-kept, and as Walter moved cautiously along the path he kept his hands out before him, and fended off more than one straying branch which would otherwise have caught him across the face. He lost the light which he had seen and blundered on in the dark, which became

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deeper as the ground sloped downward and overshadowing trees grew thicker and wilder. •

At last even the glimpse of deep lead-colored sky was gone, and the branches covered everything with an interwoven roof. It was like moving in a tunnel, a tunnel that was low, and narrow, and wet under foot. Walter wondered where on earth the pathway was taking him. Touching and hearing were his only guide and under his groping touch elusive leaves withdrew, whilst his ears seemed full of odd whispering noises and of the sound of his own feet slipping and squelching in the muddy slime.

Then suddenly the light again. A flash like the flicker of a bird's wing, gone in a breath and leaving an even, inky black behind. He stood still and counted ten. Then again the quick, flickering light, but this time he was expecting it and his eye caught the flicker of water and saw that his path lay along the edge of some large pond or lake. The flash came from the water's edge about fifty yards away and between it and him he had a glimpse of a black waterway that was bounded on every side by the dark. He listened intently and heard the lapping, and the even flow of the water, the passing gust of a wind with fine rain in it, the rustle and movement of leaf on glossy leaf, and faintly behind these sounds the impact of feet, moving as his own had done, in wet and boggy ground. The sound was so faint that he could not be sure that it was not fancy that made him suppose he heard it. Then it ceased and again the light flashed out, much more to the right now, and making for a full half-minute a lane of brightness



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that moved steadily up and down and sideways before it disappeared. In that half minute Walter heard a new sound, a little, gasping sound that made him take his own breath quickly. It was very faint, very weak, but it came to him through all the voices of the night and cried out to him, and as he heard it he saw.

A yard or two from where he stood the path ran sharply in to the right and then out again—a hairpin bend. The water followed it. The bank, crumbling and irregular, fell away on the near side. On the far side, high, overhanging the water and held up by branching roots, an entangled covert of shrubs made a wall that topped the bank.

And under that bank stood Jane. The ray of light passed between shadowing boughs and Walter saw her. His heart leapt. He saw her. The ray of light passed on. He had seen her, and in his mind he saw her still, standing close in under the bank, almost knee deep in water, bare-headed, the short, bright hair dragged, disheveled, the little white face piteous beyond words, the eyes blank with terror. His Jane. What had they done to her? A blazing fury of rage took him stumbling forward. He half spoke her name and then his foot caught in a loop of root and he came down heavily in a bog of mud and slime. As he fell he heard the sound of some one running. It came from behind.

## CHAPTER XXVII

When Florence King was left alone in the passage she stood quite still for a moment with a frightened look on her face, hands tightly clasped in front of her. Then suddenly she seemed to wake into restless activity. She came down the stairs with a rush that shocked Sascha to his feet. He stood looking after her, tear-stained and woebe-gone, as she ran through the hall and straight out of the open front door.

Florence's wild rush brought her to the edge of the light and then she stopped, sobbing and panting. When a figure stepped out of the darkness she called out on a thin, high note and got back a "Silence, you fool!" from Nadine, at which she choked and was quiet. Nadine's voice, low as it was, held so much cutting contempt that it froze her words and sobs. She stood and stared until Nadine shook her roughly by the shoulder.

"Speak fool! What is it? Why do you run out—cry out? What has happened?"

"He—has come—back."

Florence whispered the words.

"Who has come back? Le Noir? Does Lazare know?"

Florence shook her head.

"No, no, not—Le Noir!"

"No! Who then? Quick! Who has come back? Fool woman, if I had not my hands full, you should

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feel them about that throat of yours! Who has come back? Speak!"

"Major Oakers—and I think—"

"You—think? Where is he?"

"I—don't—know."

Nadine tightened her grip on Florence's quivering shoulder.

"You've seen him?"

"Yes."

"What did he want? How did he get in?"

"I don't know. He ran past me in the hall."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know—I don't,—"

"Oh, you never do, you fool!"

Nadine swung her to one side and began to run down the hill toward the lake. She had seen the flash of Lazare's light, and felt the first thing to do was warn him of the return of Major Oakers. She switched on her own light as she ran and, shifting it to her left hand, drew from the pocket of her nurse's uniform, a small automatic.

Walter Oakers, a little dazed but furious over his clumsiness, heard the sound of running feet, the tap tap of them on the gravel, changing to a sucking sound where the bog began. Then, as he scrambled to his knees, slipping and grasping at branches that betrayed him, the footsteps ceased, something cold pressed against the back of his neck, and a deep, cool voice said quietly:

"Hands up, Major Oakers, or I fire."

Walter's rage overpowered him. He kicked out violently in the direction of the voice, and promptly fell face downward in the mud. The cold object pressed hard upon his neck. The

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voice said viciously, "If you move you're dead," and then, rising a tone or two, called in a resonant, carrying note, "Lazare! Lazare!"

Jane had not seen Walter. The ray of light which rested on her had not reached him. She had not seen him, but she had heard his footsteps on one side of her, knew Lazare to be coming up on the other, and felt herself hemmed in, past hope of escape. When he slipped and fell she shuddered all over and bit deep into her lip to stop herself from screaming. She must not scream. She must stay very quiet, and perhaps they would not find her. She stood holding on to a slimy root the water up to her knees and icy cold, her woven skirt sopping wet, her hands wet and so dreadfully, dreadfully cold; and—standing like that, all in the pitch blackness, she saw the flicker of Nadine's light, and heard her say Walter's name.

Walter! It was Walter!

She had been so terrified by that heavy tread, and it was Walter all the time. Everything seemed to shake.—Nadine's voice came from very far off.

"If you move you're dead!"

She was speaking to Walter. She was armed and Walter was not, and he had slipped and fallen in that horrible mud. Jane tried to think, but she seemed capable only of holding on tightly to the slippery roots. She tried to let go to do something, but her fingers remained rigidly closed. And then Nadine called out, and Lazare came running along the path, his light sending a dancing beam before him, his voice answering Nadine.

"Where are you? What's up?"

"Over this way! I've got Major Oakers! Quick!"

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Jane heard Lazare pass her, his tread sounding almost above her head as he came round the hair-pin bend. Then there was the confused sound of some sort of struggle, and Lazare saying low and viciously:

"Do you want to be shot? What a fool you are, Major Oakers"

Jane trembled from head to foot. It was so dark. The light came and went. There were bushes between her and these three on the path beyond. What was happening? She could hear Walter's voice now, half choked. What were they doing to him? And then Lazare spoke, coming forward a little and pitching his voice so that it would carry without being loud.

"Miss Jane, are you there?"

She did not answer. Jane could just see him now, a dark figure at the water's edge. He swung his light in a half circle, and called again:

"Come, speak up, I know you're here. What a lot of trouble you give! It is most unwise of you. I have footprints, so you see I know that you are here. If you do not immediately come out we shall shoot Major Oakers. I don't think any one will look for him in the lake. Do you hear, Miss Jane?"

Still no answer. The light swept round and back again. It was strange to see green leaf and pale folded bud spring into view as the beam touched the darkness. Strange to see the little rippled waves each with its tiny shadow. If Lazare had taken three steps to the right, the light would have reached Jane; but a bush screened her and the light stopped short.

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

"Once more Miss Jane. If you don't come out you will be very sorry."

Walter Oakers, lying like a trussed fowl in the very middle of the boggy path, strained at his bonds and strained in vain. They had stuffed some woollen cloth into his mouth, his hands were strapped behind his back, and his ankles tied together. If only Jane would not obey their instructions. If only she would stay hidden. It was the one chance, the only possible chance for either of them.

"Miss Jane, for the very last time, will you come out? If you do not—" He swung round. "Nadine, are you ready? Very good, I will count slowly up to ten. If by that time she does not answer, you will shoot. It will make very little noise in this bog."

He paused. Then, "I will begin to count now, Miss Jane. One—two—three—four."

He counted evenly, without haste. Jane heard him as if in a dream. It was not a nice dream. She wanted to wake up, but the dream held her.

"Five — six — seven — eight — nine — " When Lazare said six, Jane began to try to move, but she could not. She began to try to call out, but she could not make a sound. She stood rigid, and heard him slacken pace a little on seven — eight — and nine — and then, with a gasp that seemed to be wrenched from her, she called aloud, and her voice was like a child's crying in the night.

"Stop. Stop — I'm — here!"

Lazare drew a short breath of relief. His bluff had not been called. In these matters one could

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always count on a girl in love. The rest would be easy now.

He stepped to the right, swung his light and saw Jane standing under the bank, her eyes wide upon him, her lips still quivering.

"Come around here."

In his bonds Walter writhed at the tone of authority. They were done now. At the mercy of this merciless devil. Jane shook her head only just moving it.

"I — can't."

"Come around here."

"I—can't—let—go," Her teeth were chattering.

Walter heard Lazare swear, and with ears unnaturally strained caught every sound that followed, the heavy tread, the breaking of twigs, the water dripping from Jane's drenched skirt as Lazare dragged her roughly up the bank, her sobbing breath and broken, "No, no, I can walk, I can!" as he lifted her; and with every sound the sense of his own helplessness became more unendurable. Lazare came to a halt beside him, looked down at him for a moment and stirred him with his foot as one would a sleeping dog. There was no violence in the movement. Walter could imagine a smile on the man's face; he had reason to be pleased with himself.

He spoke to Nadine.

"Take the whistle out of my coat pocket and blow the signal. You know the one, three shorts and one long. Gregor will hear it and come. We need him."

Nadine took the whistle. Her hand touched Jane, who sagged helplessly against Lazare's shoulder.

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"Bah!" she said, and flicked her lightly on the cheek. Then she laughed harshly and blew the whistle.

The sharp bright sound seemed to pierce the darkness like a flame.

They stood and waited for Gregor.



## CHAPTER XXVIII

Gregor came to them, guided by their flash lights. He showed no surprise, but stood stolidly a yard away from the group and waited for his orders, as no doubt he would have waited in a burning house or on a sinking ship. Lazare spoke to him.

"Have you anything to report?"

And for the first time Jane heard the man speak.

"There is a car in the lane, sir," he said.

"Where?"

"Under the trees above the gap."

"It is not Le Noir's car?"

"No."

"You are sure of that?"

"Yes."

Again Lazare touched Walter with his foot.

"Oh, so that's how you came, my good friend," he said. "Well, it's easier to get in than get out again." Then he turned back to Gregor.

"Untie his feet. He can walk to the house. You will hold his arm and guide him and Nadine will come behind with the gun. It's time we were out of this. I will go first."

As Walter Oakers tramped back to the sloping path maddening thoughts rushed through his mind. A wild desire to make a dash for it, a realization of the hopelessness of such an attempt, Jane's nearness, her piteous plight, a raging contempt for the ease with which he had fallen into a trap. These

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thoughts and others as cheerful bore him wretched company.

As they came up the flagged path to the open door they could see that Florence King was pacing the lighted hall within. Once and then again, she crossed the doorway, moving with quick, aimless steps, and as she passed her lips moved. Sascha sat on the first stair, his head buried in his hands.

As Lazare came into the hall Florence veered, cried out and stood staring.

Going to the drawing room, Lazare spoke up. "Put on the lights, do you expect me to see in the dark?"

He lowered Jane into the armchair at the foot of the table and she huddled in it, her eyes closed. Florence looked away from her, moving nervously until Lazare was between her and the pitiful figure. With averted eyes and in a low, hurried voice she said.

"There's been a telephone call."

Lazare held up his hand, went quickly to the door, and shut it, leaving Walter in the hall with Nadine and Gregor. Then, he turned:

"Who rang up?"

Florence whispered the answer.

"Le Noir."

"What did he want?"

Florence moved again. Her back was to Jane now; it was easier to speak. From where she first stood she could see, not Jane's face, but one of her hands lying palm upward on the drenched woollen skirt. She did not like to see Jane's hand; it was easier to speak when she could not see it.

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"He wanted—oh, I don't know—I think he wanted to know what happened after he left."

"He was calling from London?"

"I—I think so."

"Well,—what did you say?"

"I told him—I said you were out. I didn't know what to say; I was afraid. I said I thought he had better ring up again. I said — "

Lazare swore.

"You said? Who cares what you said? What did he say, Le Noir?"

"He said—he said—Oh, but Lazare you—you frighten me so; don't look at me like that—don't. Oh, he said he would ring up la— I think — "

Her voice trailed away and ceased, and sharp upon its last vague murmur there came the ringing of the telephone bell.

Lazare made a stride toward the instrument, then turned, flung the door wide open, and called to Nadine.

"Here, give the gun to Gregor and come take this call. I think I know who it is, but it's better to be on the safe side. Gregor, if he moves, shoot at once."

Walter stood quite still. His rage was under control his mind busy searching desperately for something, anything, which might be turned to advantage. Nadine passed into the drawing-room and shut the door. As she passed Lazare, he said very low; "It's probably Le Noir. Just make sure, and then I'll speak to him."

Jane had not moved within, but the sound of the bell had roused her. Her mind was clear. Only it was such a terrific effort to move, to think, to

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

do anything. For herself she only wanted to slip away into oblivion. She no longer cared what happened to her. But there was Walter. The thought of Walter hurt so much that she knew she must go on trying, go on keeping awake. When Lazare flung open the door into the hall she looked and saw him standing there, all his great strength useless, his hands tied behind him, his face above the gag a mask of mud, his eyes —

It was the look in his eyes that she could not bear. It wrung her heart. The power of thought and action returned to her in a hot tide of pity and love, and, as Nadine took down the receiver, she raised herself a little, grasping the arms of the chair and cried loud and sharp!

“Help! Help! Help!”

Nadine was very quick. Her hand covered the mouth-piece as the second cry rang out, and next instant she had hung up the receiver. Jane saw her swing round, saw Lazare’s face of fury, and slipped sideways from her chair in a heap.

Jane was in the hall, dimly conscious of angry voices, of some one shaking her roughly, from very far away Sascha’s voice: “Mon Dieu, what have you done to her?”

Jane came back again to the idea of gaining time. That was the only hope, she must make time for help to reach them, and she set herself to the task with a little secret sense of exhilaration.

For a while she had only to lie still. There were hurrying footsteps, coming and going. Then some one held a cup of hot soup to her lips and Lazare said: “She’s no use to us like this. You’ve got to

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get her going again. Half an hour will finish it then, and we'll be off."

Jane made that soup last a very long time. It wasn't easy, because she wanted it so badly. It was hot and she was so very cold, but she took it in infinitesimal sips and was thankful enough to have it.

As she came to the end of it she heard Lazare tell Nadine to go back to the telephone. "Ring up the exchange and find out where that call came from. It must have been Le Noir, but it's too important to leave to chance. If any one else heard her scream—"

"Oh, it was Le Noir," said Nadine composedly—"Who else could it have been?"

She went through the open door into the drawing room and, as she spoke, Jane's heart beat. Nadine's voice came and went. Nadine came back.

"Yes, it was Le Noir, all right," she said. "That call was from London—'a foreign gentleman,' the girl at the exchange said. So you see it is all right. He will ring up again presently, I expect."

Jane fought despair, fought it inch by inch, and forced it back. She would go on just the same. She set her teeth, and was ready for Lazare when he came over to her.

"Now, Miss Jane," he said. "Don't you think you have given enough trouble, and don't you think we treat you very well? Only this I suggest, that you do not try our patience too far; that would be foolish."

She looked up at him as if she did not understand. They had laid her at the foot of the stairs

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and propped her up with cushions. Her gaze rested blankly on him. She said nothing.

He took her by both wrists and, pulling her up, held her there at arm's length facing him.

"Now, Miss Jane, we come to business. Understand me. If you faint again we shall bring you round with a red hot iron. It is a fine restorative. But you will not faint; I think you have enough sense for that. You will come into the drawing room, and you will open the case which, as you see, Nadine has taken from your pocket."

Jane looked him straight in the eye.

"I won't do anything until I have talked to Major Oakers. I want to talk to him. I won't do anything unless you let him speak to me."

"And if we let you?" Lazare's eyes searched her face.

"I will tell you when we have talked."

"And why should we allow this interview?"

"Because," said Jane, "I won't do anything at all without it. I don't really care what you do or what I do. You've pushed me too far and I don't care. It's just as you like."

She wavered on her feet, and he let go her hands and saw her grope her way back to the pile of cushions and sink down there. He went over to Nadine and they spoke together in whispers.

After a minute he addressed Walter.

"Very well, we will let you have this interview. Major Oakers, I think you are really an intelligent man when you are not blinded by fury as you were just now. There are two points which I would commend to your intelligence." He came quite close and spoke in a low voice inaudible to the

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others. "In the first place, if Miss Jane does not open the case this is what we shall do to her." His voice sank lower still, but Walter could hear every word and what he heard bit into his consciousness with a burning agony. The words, the unendurable words, flowed quietly and evenly from Lazare's lips, and Walter couldn't shut his ears or silence the lips with a blow.

"That," said Lazare, "is our program in case of any little feminine obstinacy. Ladies like to be pressed and to say 'no' before they say 'yes'. Well, that is our program, and the first of the two points which I commend to you. The other is this, it is for you to take advantage of this interview which we are allowing you to have—it is really very good of us, you know—use your influence with Miss Jane, get her to open the case, and I assure you we will be extremely kind to you both. Now, will you follow me upstairs? I don't think I will trust you in a room without bars." He turned back to the stairfoot. "Allow me, Miss Jane," He picked her up and led the way. Walter followed. Gregor brought up the rear. At a word from Lazare he went off to the left at the top of the stairs, afterwards appearing in Miss Eliza's room with a pair of handcuffs in his hand.

Lazare put Jane down, bade Gregor hold Major Oaker's arms at the elbow, and proceeded very deftly to untie the rope with which Walter's wrists had been tied. Almost with the same movement he slipped on the handcuffs, and then, still in the same composed manner, removed the gag and the bandage that secured it.

Gregor busied himself with closing and locking

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the shutters in all three rooms. It was all very unhurried and business like.

"Now, Major Oakers," said Lazare. "You have your chance. I advise you to employ it to advantage. It will not be offered to you again." He went out, pausing on the threshold for a last word: "Of course, if you like, you can make a noise—call, shout, bang on the shutters, par exemple—but I really do not advise such a course of action. Gregor will be outside the door with a pistol. If there is a sound he will simply walk in and shoot, so I do not advise it. And now I will leave you to your interview."

Lazare went out, Gregor following. The door was shut. The bolts went home with a click. Walter and Jane were alone.



## CHAPTER XXIX

All the time that Lazare and Gregor were in the room Jane did not raise her eyes to look at Walter, but when they were gone she looked up and tried to smile, tried hard, and very nearly burst out crying instead. Walter stood before the fire place, his handcuffed hands behind him, his head a little sunk forward and his face plastered with mud.

Jane got up, holding on to her chair.

"Your poor face—all that mud," she said in a little shaken voice. "Oh, my poor Walie," and she went with slow, difficult steps to the bathroom soaked the end of a towel in water and came back again.

Walter moved to meet her.

"But, dear, you will have to bend down," she said, sweetly, "you are so high up." And as Walter bent closer to her, Jane began to wash the mud away from his face. Her hands trembled slightly. Walter felt the soft hands touch his face and wondered how much more he could bear without breaking down.

"Jane—dear little Jane," Walter went on saying it over and over, and then in a sort of rage: "Sweet-heart, tell me what did they do to you? What have they done?" Jane said nothing for a minute or two, only nestled close to his shoulder.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing. I'm perfectly O. K. It's you dear, you poor old thing," she said at last.

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

"You're sure—sure they haven't hurt you," inquired Walter. "Why are you so white then?"

"Hungry!" said Jane, laconically. "They wouldn't let me sleep and they fed me on odd cups of cocoa and weak soup, but they didn't hurt me. I'm really quite all right."

He said quickly: "Why did you scream—downstairs?"

"The telephone bell rang, I thought some one might hear—the girl at the exchange or the person who was calling. I thought it was just a chance—and there aren't too many chances, are there, Walter dear."

She looked at him steadily and he looked away.

"It's a tight place, Jane," he said, and Jane nodded.

"I know. That's why I made up my mind to try to see you like this. I wanted to say things and I wanted to know if you cared. You do, don't you?"

"Jane darling, you know I care."

"Yes, I know. I think I got to know when I was shut up here with nothing to do but think. I used to think about you a lot, Walter, and I used to wonder if you cared, and sometimes I felt sure you did because of the way you looked at me that last day at Hastings."

"You poor dear little girl, of course I care. Why didn't you tell me, darling, why on earth?"

"Well, I don't know, just my foolish way I guess. And I doubt if I should ever have told you if—if—well, if I didn't think we were pretty well up against it. And we are, aren't we dear?"

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

"Yes, dear, I'm afraid so. Of course there's a chance."

"And a very slim one at that. That was Le Noir calling. He was here this afternoon when they were trying to make me open the case. He made off when the inspector came back."

"Swimerton came back?"

"Yes, he came back this afternoon. He rang and rang the door and frightened them into fits, but they bundled me up here and Le Noir got away and they let him in. He wanted to see Lazare. He only stayed a few minutes, so I suppose he was satisfied. Le Noir made off. He was calling back now to know what happened after he left. Walter, what are we to do?"

"I don't know, Jane."

He did not avoid her eyes this time. They looked steadily at each other. There was no need for words. It was Walter who spoke at last.

"When I came upstairs," he said, "I thought I must urge you to open the case. I didn't think I could do anything else. I meant to tell you that it was the only thing to do and to say that it would be all right, they'd never get out of England with the secret, we'd be sure to get them first. That was my first impulse."

"Well?" said Jane. She had her hand on his shoulder. "Well?" she said and gave him a little half-impatient pat.

"If that's what you were going to say, why didn't you say it?"

"Because," said Walter, slowly, "I remembered the look in that man's eyes. What d'you call him?"

"Lazare."

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

"Yes, when he said, 'If you open the case we will be very kind to you both,' his eyes gave him away. When I had time to think, I felt quite sure absolutely sure, that if you opened the case we might have ten minutes to live or we might have less. We certainly shouldn't have more."

Jane's hand tightened on his coat. She gave that familiar little nod of hers.

"Yes—I think so, too," she said.

"You see," said Walter, "they'd be bound to get rid of us, absolutely. They couldn't keep us here and they could not turn us loose, so it's fairly obvious that we'd have to be disposed of. The only possible chance is to play for time. Something might happen."

"That's the way I've been thinking," said Jane.—  
"That's what I kept saying to myself downstairs. It's the one and only chance we've got."

"Stretch out the time, pretend to make terms—anything. You see, I might be traced here. It's not too likely, but I came through Ledington at such a speed that I expect half the police there have my number. And look here, Jane, are these people all equally up to their necks in this? Isn't there a chance of any of 'em weakening? What about Florence King?"

"Florence," said Jane briefly. "She's absolutely crazy about Lazare and scared stiff into the bargain. Sascha's a better chance. He let me go out of the drawing room window. He says he's in love with me, poor boy, but I fear his terror of Lazare will hold him back. No, it's no use counting on any one here. We've just got to stick to stalling them along. If the worst comes to the worst, hor-

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"For I mean, I expect Lacquer threatened you didn't he?"

"Yes, he did, Jane," confessed Walter slowly.

"Well, don't you worry about that, old dear. If the worst comes to the worst I shall pretend I've given in. They'll give me the case to open and I shall wrench the spring and release the acid. Then the formula at least would be safe out of their hands and I think they would just shoot us without any thought of the possible outcome of their act."

Jane's voice was just the very faintest whisper close to his ear. He turned his head with a faint groan, and they kissed, a long strange kiss, a kiss that might be their last. To their ears came the sound of footsteps, then the sound of bolts withdrawn. Jane went quickly back to her chair.

The door opened slowly.

Gregor entered the room. He did not speak but motioned with his hand, and Jane and Walter walked past him out into the hallway.

At the head of the stairs stood Lazare, waiting. Before they came to him the door of Miss King's room opened and Nadine came out. She had put on a clean apron. The fresh starch cracked as she walked.

They all went down the stairs.

As they reached the first floor, Lazare, leaning the way round ushering them into the drawing room. Florence was on her knees by the hearth, making up the fire. She paid no attention to them as they entered. Of Sascha there was no sign.

Jane went straight to the chair she had occupied before. The case lay on the table under the light. It was as in the year in which the same thing happens again and again. It seemed to her as if Miss Eliza's room with its peace and quiet and this room with its polished table on which lay the lacquer were objects reflected endlessly in a series of mirrors.

Walter was guided to a chair at the other end of the table, and Jane thought it odd that he should occupy Le Noir's place. Gregor stood on one side of her with a paper in his hand and beyond Gregor she could see Florence. Florence had risen to her feet and was moving toward the service door in the corner of the room. Lazare, seeing everything as he did, saw it too. He remained standing and

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swung round now, saying sharply:

"Where are you going?"

"I—I don't—know. I—I thought—"

"You are not required to think! Come here!"

For only a moment she actually hesitated, but as he made a movement in her direction, she started, came over to the table and dropped into a chair.

Lazare sat down by the side of Jane. Nadine remained standing on the other side of her, one hand just resting on the edge of the table.

"Well—Miss Jane?" said Lazare.

She folded her hands in her lap and looked down. "What do you want?" she said.

"Is it possible that you have any doubts? I do not think so." He put out his hand and drew the lacquer case a little nearer. "Most clever men, these Chinese, are they not? Why those fishes seem to be really swimming. I just wonder which of them hides the little spring, but I shall not have long to wonder. You will now open the case!"

Jane put one hand to her head.

"And if I've forgotten how to open it?" she said.

"That would be most unfortunate—for you and for Major Oakers. It would, in fact, be a disaster. I really think it to your own comfort, Miss Jane not to have forgotten."

"But it's a long time ago," said Jane very low. "I only opened it once—it is possible that I have forgotten."

"Then you will make it your business to remember." He laid his hand on hers as he spoke.

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It lay there hard and heavy as a piece of steel, the ugly fingers spread out like claws. It covered Jane's little hand and weighed upon it.

With a sharp movement of repulsion she swung round in her chair, leaning back upon the farther arm of it and facing him.

"Lazare," she said, panting a little, "tell me honestly—why do you want that formula so badly. What are you going to do with it? I must know that—I must—"

Lazare made a slight gesture toward Florence King.

"My dear Miss Jane, what a question! What a question! Surely our good friend Florence has never for one moment ceased to assure you that our sole and only motive is—oh, come, Miss Jane, I think that you must know it all by heart—the good of humanity, the blessings of universal peace threatened by this new and abominable development of militarism. Surely she has already told you all this and more."

She glanced at Florence and saw the color rise in her cheeks. Even now she felt sorry for poor Florence. She turned back to Lazare frowning.

"Do you think me a fool?" she said. "I do not believe you do. I want the truth, not all this sham stuff. I think you know very well that it never took me in for an instant, and if you are as clever as I think you are, you will realize that it will pay you better to tell me the truth. I won't move a finger until you do."

Walter sat stiffly at the opposite end of the table. He had not much hope, but he was not going to neglect the very slimmest chance. Out



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of the corner of his eye he measured the distance between himself and Gregor. He sat looking at Jane and Lazare and the lacquer case, and the lamp on the table, by which the room was lighted. All the time he was forming a plan—a desperate plan, but better than none at all.

He saw an unpleasant look cross Lazare's face as Jane spoke and heard him say in a low voice, which meant rage: "You will and you won't? Do you think you have any choice?"

"You would do better to tell me the truth," said Jane, wearily.

He stared at her with those light eyes of his full of gloomy anger.

"The truth?" he said. "Well, why not? Only there is this: no one can tell all the truth, because it is only when two understand each other that there can be truth between them. Between you and me—never—never. Are you so banal as not to know that? I think you know it only too well. There is between us too strong an antipathy for there to be any truth from me to you. You may think what you please, Miss Jane."

He paused dramatically before he continued:

"Miss Jane, think what you like, but bear this in mind. I will have that formula if it means a hundred lives like yours or your good friend the Major's. You see I am half a peasant; and our peasant is all crude melodrama in an affair of this nature. The other side of me, the side that comes from a princely house, laughs at the peasant and despises him. If I could have been all prince I would have ruled the world." His voice sank low, "I may yet," he said and fell into silence.

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Florence's trembling voice broke upon it. She leaned toward Lazare with outstretched hands that trembled, too. Her words came fast.

"What are you saying? You mustn't say such things. What do you mean? What are you talking about, Lazare!"

Without turning he struck her across the face with the back of his hand. It was more an impatient gesture than a blow, but Florence King gave a very bitter cry and dropped her face upon her outstretched arms.

When Florence screamed Nadine laughed. Jane's anger boiled over. She spoke sweetly to Lazare.

"You were quite right," she said. "You are certainly half a peasant. I am at least able to believe that much of what you say."

Walter Oakers leaned forward in his place at the other end of the table. He spoke for the first time.

"Isn't all this rather irrelevant?" he said and at the sound of his voice the hands which Lazare had clenched relaxed and his eyes left Jane's. A tense moment passed.

"I agree with you," said Lazare. "I propose that we come to business. If you have anything *relevant* to say"—he stressed the word—"I shall be very much interested to hear what it is, Major Oakers."

"Well, I should like to know what terms you are proposing. If Miss Bainwright opens the case—I don't say she will, but if she does, what are you prepared to offer? You will probably admit that the case is her property and that she has a certain claim to a *quid pro quo*."

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"That is so." Lazare's voice was smooth again. "Well, I won't say that our original offer to her stands in its entirety, because the position—well, it has changed a little, has it not? But in these altered circumstances what I propose is, I think, sufficiently generous."

He put his hand into his pocket, drew out a key and flung it upon the table beside the lacquer case. It made a little ringing sound.

"As soon as Miss Jane has opened the case she shall have that key, which—as you probably guess—unlocks the pair of handcuffs you are wearing; and you and she will be free to go anywhere you like. We shall treat you as honorable persons and merely ask for an understanding that you will not communicate with the police or make any effort to trace us for the very moderate space of ten hours. After that, my dear Major Oakers, your Scotland Yard may be as busy as it likes; it will not incommode us at all."

"Thanks," said Walter. His tone was dry. "It's such a generous offer that I think I should like to talk it over with Miss Bainwright."

After a short pause Walter spoke again. "You haven't any objections, I suppose?"

"But I'm afraid I have." Spoke up Lazare, his voice suddenly hard. "Let us understand each other. You have had your interview. You have had my terms. You talk of a quid pro quo: I want mine. I am not a safe person to play with or to insult. Miss Jane was unwise just now. She will now open the case, or, if you prefer it, the program of which I spoke will begin."

## CHAPTER XXXI

When Major Oakers' car tore by in the darkness Inspector Swimerton was very much annoyed. He did not know whose car it was. His attempt to catch sight of the number failed and his indignation was still hot when he rode into Ledington.

He stopped and spoke to the first policeman he met.

"Did a two-seater pass you here about ten minutes ago. He nearly put me in the ditch down the road, I tried to get the number, but he was going too fast, must have been doing about fifty."

"Yes, sir. A car went out the road you came in on a bit ago, and he was doing more than the laws allow. I got his number though."

"Good work officer."

The policeman pulled out a notebook, turned three or four pages laboriously and read out a number which, as the inspector heard it, brought him up with a start.

"You're sure that's the number?"

"Absolutely. I tried to stop him and he paid not the least bit of attention to my warnings. Dangerous driving, I says, to myself, and took his number."

\* \* \*

Inspector Swimerton rang off, and turned back into the room, his usually wooden face full of anxiety.

"What's up?" said the local inspector.

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"That's what I'd like to know. There was a woman screaming at the other end. I must go back at once, and it's not a job I want to tackle alone. How many men can you give me, inspector?"

"Well, let's see," he said slowly. "There's Jones just coming off his beat, Bolster just a-going and Webb ought to be here, and—myself, about four inspector."

Inspector Swimerton stood by chaffing inwardly. He could not get the sound of those faint screams out of his ears.

It was with immense relief that he stepped into the car, saw his re-enforcements bundle into another, and for the third time that day he set out toward Charwood. He hoped very much that they would not be too late.

They ran down from the crossways, going slow and without lights, and drew up a couple of hundred yards short of the house. The door in the wall was shut and barred. It was not part of the inspector's plan to ring the bell this time. He gave a low-voiced order and one stout constable made a back and one by one the others scrambled over the wall. The Inspector came last and helped to haul the stout policeman up. When they were all over there was a moment's uncertainty.

"Better go round to the back, one of you—yes, you, Webb. The path runs round the house. Keep on the grass and go quietly."

Webb went and for a brief space the inspector watched the house. An upper window was lighted and a faint gleam came from windows on the lower floor which he knew to be the shuttered windows of the drawing-room in which he had interviewed

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

Lazare. The hall door of solid oak was shut and showed nothing. As he waited for the moment of indecision to pass the hall door was suddenly, and violently flung open, showing the lighted space within, a man's figure stood out for an instant against the background, Sascha's hands were pressed to his head, he halted for just a second and then came stumbling down the steps and away from the house and as he came he groaned aloud:

"Jane, Jane! Oh, mon dieu, Jane! They will kill her!"

Like a flash of lightning the moment of indecision was past. Inspector Swimerton ran up the path and into the hall, followed closely by the Ledington officers. As they crossed the threshold there came from the room on the left the sound of voices, the sound of running feet, two shots in rapid succession followed by a crash and a loud piercing scream.

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Her eyes were fixed upon the lacquer case and the little key.

The room was in darkness and full of noise. The last thing that she saw was the lacquer case, the center fish, and the rose below it glowing as if they were alive. Her hand went out, closed on the case, withdrew itself. She stepped back, pushing over her chair so that it fell. Men were beating on the door, shouting. She went on stepping back, taking one step at a time. The noise was dreadful.

Back and back and back, until her free hand touched the velvet curtains that screened the shuttered windows. The door burst inward with a loud cracking sound, a broken panel splintering. Walter called out. He called "Jane! Jane!" but she could not answer. The light went on suddenly. Inspector Swimerton, with his hand on the switch, saw Florence King sitting back in her chair staring at him, her eyes unnaturally blue in a dead-white face, her hands held up as if to ward off a blow. He looked past her and was aware of Major Oakers struggling to his feet, his hands behind his back and handcuffed, and in the window Miss Jane Bainwright, clutching the brown velvet drapes with one hand and holding to her breast with the other the red lacquer case. Otherwise the room was empty.

The inspector was the first man into the room. As he switched on the light two officers from Ledington pushed across the threshold, and the door, which had been swinging crazily on a single hinge, fell crashing to the floor. It was Jones, who made straight for the service door, followed by the other officers.

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

"Good work, Swimerton! Good work!" shouted Major Oakers. Florence King's lips moved, but no sound came from them. The key of the handcuffs lay on the empty table. Walter came plunging forward. "Here, man, unlock these things. That's the key. Where's Jane? Where's Jane, I say?" and then as he swung round to let the inspector get at his wrists he faced the windows and saw her. She had not stirred. The light showed how white she was. Her eyes looked as if they did not see. The handcuffs dropped with a clatter. Jones called from the service door, "this way, sir," and Inspector Swimerton was off hot foot, with a word flung over his shoulder to Major Oakers. "Take charge here, sir, will you? I can't afford to leave a man."

"There are three of them, all armed," Walter called after him, and he called back; "Thank you, sir," and was gone.

The house echoed with the sound of tramping feet.

Officer Webb meanwhile had been making his way round the house according to his instructions. He arrived at the back door, in fact, at the same moment that the inspector and the other officers burst into the drawing-room. The door at which he found himself was locked.

Webb walked back a pace or two, reflecting on what to do in a case like this, when the door behind him was suddenly wrenched open, several persons rushed out and he felt himself knocked sprawling into the bushes nearby. As he picked himself up he heard, from within the house, shouts and a sound of splintering wood. He at once blew his



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whistle and set off across the garden in pursuit of the people who had knocked him down.

It was Nadine who had thought of Walter Oakers car and it was Nadine who had thought of locking the kitchen door behind them to delay pursuit. She ran beside Lazare in the darkness, her hand in her apron pocket clenched on the automatic.

None of the three had spoken after Nadine's quick whisper. "Oakers' car in the lane! Our only chance!" They ran on in silence and heard the officer's heavy tread behind them and the piercing sound of his whistle, blown at intervals as he ran.

As they turned into the path between the high box hedges the whistle was answered from nearer the house and they strained forward, running for their lives. They came through the woodland and dropped down over the gap while the pursuers were still entangled in the unfamiliar windings of the path.

Lazare's eyes searched the darkness for the car and found it. He spoke then for the first time in a sharp whisper.

"Jump in, Nadine," he said, as he seated himself behind the wheel. "Gregor, hold them back." He stepped on the starter as he spoke. There was a buzzing sound. Again he stepped on the starter, and yet again. There was no response. The cold engine would not start.

The sound of voices and of running feet came from beyond the hedge. Gregor's pistol spoke. "Lazare," Nadine spoke to him excitedly. "The slope, it's very steep."

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Lazare understood immediately. He called out rapidly to Gregor, who quickly jumped in beside Nadine. He released the brake. The car began to move with its own weight. Gregor fired again twice. The car was sliding forward, slowly, at first, but gathering momentum as the slope grew sharper. Their pace increased. The engine half started, stopped, burred, choked, and finally got running some fifty yards down the lane. The voices and the gap were behind them.

Inspector Swimerton stood in the mud and heard the hum of the car die away in the distance. He was a man of few words. He knew when he was beaten.

He turned in silence and climbed the gap again.

"Back to the house!" he said.

When the inspector had released Walter Oakers and the sound of trampling feet had died away Jane let go of the drapes and began to cry. She looked up and saw Walter coming toward her and she ran into his arms, her whole body shaking with sobs. His arms closed hard about her, his head bent to hers. His voice, almost as unsteady as her own, whispered incoherent words of love and comfort. Presently Jane moved a little, looked up and said in a shaky whisper:

"Walie—we're alive. It's over. Oh, dear, hold me tight, don't let me go."

"I won't ever let you go," said Walter firmly. "You're not fit to look after yourself. Oh, Jane, you little darling, what ever made you trust people like this? How could you?"

"I didn't," said Jane. "I didn't. But, oh, Walie, what does it matter anyhow? It's over, it's all

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over. We've waked up, and we're alive, and we've got each other. Oh, Walie, what does anything in the world matter when you've got me and I've got you, and it's over, it's all over."

Walter said nothing. He had Jane in his arms safe and his own again and he had no words. What were words, anyhow? She was his little Janie, and he had her again.

Jane went on speaking in the same whispering, trembling voice.

"Oh, I was so afraid that I should give in, Walie, You don't know how afraid I was. It's so awful to be afraid of being a coward." Walter almost shook her.

"You little imp," he said. "You couldn't be a coward if you tried. You're the pluckiest—" his voice failed him and he kissed her.

"I'm not—not really—and—oh, Walter, take this horrible case, it's pressing into me. I don't ever, ever, want to see red lacquer again. Put the beastly thing in your pocket and don't let us even think of it again."

"I want to get out of this," said Walter, "I want to get you away from here. I wish to goodness Swimerton would come back. I hope they caught them. I'd like to have had a hand in it, but I suppose I can't very well leave the house."

"Oh, please don't leave me," said Jane firmly. "I'm about done for, Walie—all in. If Lazare came back I'd just crumple up like a wet tissue paper towel, and—and I simply won't be left alone in this abominable house, I won't."

It was at this junction that they became aware of Florence King.

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She was leaning back in her chair and looking at them with an expression that wrung Jane's tender heart. Her voice went on monotonously saying Lazare's name over and over again and then. "He left me here. He—He went with her—Nadine. He left me. Lazare. Laza—"

Jane sat down beside her and took her hand.

Inspector Swimerton threw them an odd look as he came in through the service door.

"Well, sir, they've got away with your car," he said to Walter. "But we'll get 'em all right. They can't possibly go far. The men are going round the place outside. I'm going to put through a call, and see if I can head them off."

"You'll want the number of my car," said Walter.

"Got it," said the inspector. "Hello, exchange!"

He was very busy for ten minutes, at the end of which he hung up the receiver and turned his attention to Florence King. Before he could address her, however, there came in through the front door officer Webb, propelling before him the unresisting and dejected Sascha, whose whole appearance was one of misery and terror. When, however, his eye lit upon Jane he exclaimed in a loud voice: "She lives, then! Thank God, She lives."

"Where did you find him?" said the inspector.

"Down by the pond, sir, a threaten' to suicide himself, and when I tells him as it's against the law, and that any thing he says will be used in evidence against him, he does nothing but say: 'She's dead! She's—dead!' or it might be 'She's killed!' for a change, until he fair made my flesh

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creep. He may be a foreigner, or he may be balmy; I don't really know what's wrong with him."

"All right, Webb, you may wait outside," said the inspector.

"Now, young man, let's hear your story," spoke the inspector to the wild-eye Sascha.

Sascha looked oddly about him and folded his arms, after which he replied emphatically: "I know nothing."

"Very well," said the inspector, "just remember, that anything you say may be used in evidence against you. That goes for you, too, Miss King. To begin with—"

At this point Jane interrupted him. She still held Florence's hand, and, as she leaned forward and addressed the inspector, she pressed it warmly.

"Inspector, I don't want there to be any mistake," she said. "I should like just to make my own position clear if you don't mind. I came here as Miss King's friend and guest—I have known her for twenty years. I stayed because I found she was being terrorized by unscrupulous servants. They had entirely got the upper hand and I am sure they are very dangerous criminals. Miss King has been completely deceived, as she now realizes. I want to make it quite clear that I have nothing against her. And as for M. Sascha—" Jane cast a sweet and somewhat tremulous smile in his direction.

"Have you any charge to make against him?" said the inspector hopefully.

"Oh, no." Jane achieved an air of ingenuous surprise. "Certainly not. We've been the greatest

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friends, and when things began to look bad he helped me to escape. I can't be grateful enough to him. You will remember that he's a friend of mine, won't you?"

"H'm," said the inspector. "And these people who are missing—it's the chauffeur and the maid—I've got their descriptions—who's the third?"

"A man called Gregor who did the housework. I don't think he knows much English."

"Look here, Swimerton," said Major Oakers, "Miss Bainwright's had enough of this. I want to get her away, and you can ask her any questions you like when she's rested. I'm going to call for a car. I'm going to take her to my cousin, Mrs. Carthers, I want to call her up, too. Meanwhile, I don't suppose you realize that Miss Bainwright is half starved. They've been keeping her short of food and sleep. Do you think one of your men could get hold of something while I'm telephoning? There's probably plenty in the house."

## CHAPTER XXXIII

Walter waited in Grace's drawing room with more patience than might have been expected. If he raged he did so inwardly. He even smiled once or twice as if his thoughts were pleasant ones. When, at last Jane came in, he held her very tight for a moment and then laughed and told her she was the world's champion sleeper.

"Yes, Walie, and I haven't had enough yet," she complained. "Grace, the old dear, said you were getting dangerous and she was afraid you'd wear out her rug pacing up and down that way, or I'd have gone back to sleep again. But now tell me all the news, what's happened since I passed out of the picture. Have they been found, and your car?"

"Yes, dear, they've found the car all right," said Walter slowly.

"Good? And Lazare?"

Walter was silent.

"Walie, come now, don't keep me waiting. Tell me, what is it?"

"Well, they've traced him and Nadine—and that houseman."

"Yes, yes," said Jane impatiently. "What's happened? Oh, Walie, you're not telling me everything."

Major Oakers hesitated.

"Jane, it's very confidential, but then, I guess you've got a right to know something about it.

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They've traced them, as I say; and I know now why Lazare said he didn't care what happened if he had twelve hours' start. And at that they would only have needed about four hours. I might have known that they had big backing—"

"Walie? What is it?"

Walter Oakers paused. "Yes, they did have a big backing," he said briefly. "And now Jane, that is all I can tell you."

Jane pursed her lips and whistled.

"Well, I'm not surprised," she said at length. "At least, not so dreadfully, I felt so all the time."

They were both silent for a moment, and Jane broke the silence, inquiring:

"What — what about poor Florence — and Sascha?"

"The whole thing will drop. The Ledington people think they were a gang of motor thieves. And as for Florence King, the fight seems to have done her good. She's pulled herself together. And Sascha, he's writing or rather he said he was going to compose a highly exquisite symphony, no doubt all about love, and moonlight and the stars."

"Oh, how lovely," breathed Jane wickedly.

"Jane," said Walter sternly, "I wouldn't be surprised if he writes that symphony about you."

"Beau—ti—ful!" said Jane dramatically.

"Jane, I'm afraid I'm going to marry a flirt."

"Shall you mind much, Walie darling?"

It was a little later on that Walter said; "Jane, you've distracted my mind. I've come here on business and not to make love to you. Now be good, and let's get down to the business at hand."



## THE RED LACQUER CASE

He put his hand into an inner pocket and produced the red lacquer case.

At the sight of it Jane stepped back quickly.

"Walie, put it away," she said quickly. "Put the dreadful thing away. I told you I never wanted to see it again."

"Well, dear, you needn't after this. Just open it and get out the formula, and I'll smash the beastly case with Grace's poker."

Jane shook her head.

"Jane, what is it? Come along, it won't take you a minute. You haven't forgotten how have you?" His voice was suddenly anxious.

The anxiety touched Jane and made her feel cold. It would have been quite easy to say that she had forgotten, but she couldn't lie to Walie. Instead she lifted honest eyes to his and said:

"No dear, I haven't forgotten, but—but I—I can't do it."

"And why not? What's the matter?"

"I simply can't do it, Walie dear."

"But dear, why not?"

Jane, he noticed was growing paler and paler.

"While at the house," said Jane slowly. "I had such a lot of time to think. I didn't make up my mind in a hurry, I thought and thought about it. Walie, it's—it's a horrible thing. If I just put out my hand and do what Ralph showed me, I'll be letting it out, and no one, yes, no one in the whole world can chain it up again. No, just a minute, let me tell you. I had meant to let you have it, but in the end I knew I couldn't. It's a beastly thing, and I can't let it out."

Her voice went away to a whisper. Her eyes

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searched Walter's face, and found no understanding there.

"But Jane," he said, "you simply can't mean that. It's—it's perfectly ridiculous. Sanders was committed to us—he—"

"Yes, I know that, but he—he couldn't face it when it came to the point, and I—I can't either. Walie, don't look like that."

"Look here, Jane," said Walter impatiently, "you're overwrought and worked up. I oughtn't to have come to-day, I suppose, but of course I'm awfully keen to know if the formula is intact. After all, the case has had some pretty rough handling, and the acid may have been released. Now look here, dearest, you just open it, and I'll take all the responsibility; you needn't worry about it or think of it again."

"But I can't," said Jane, and as she said it she saw his frown deepen, his face flush.

"What you mean is, you won't!"

At that she flared up.

"Oh, do I? Well I mean what I say. I can't open it and I won't open it, so there?"

"I guess Florence King has converted you."

Jane flung her head up.

"Why do you stop there? Why don't you ask me if I sold the paper to Lazare?"

"Jane, you've no right to say that to me. Take it back!"

"No, I won't take it back! Why should I?"

"Why, Jane!"

The tears were hot in her eyes, but her heart was sick and cold. The anger was her defense against Walter, but her heart felt the shadow of

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

estrangement and separation, and sickened.

If she held out, if she refused to open the case or opened it only to destroy the paper within, it would be the old old story over again. Walter didn't understand. He couldn't understand, perhaps no soldier could. It wasn't to be expected. He would think her converted and obstinate; and the wall of separation would rise between them again, and this time forever.

Walter Oakers, frowning angrily, saw that she was whiter than she had ever been before, and under his anger something smote in upon his heart and touched the deep walls of tenderness there. Oddly enough, for the moment this made him furious.

"Of all the silly, morbid nonsense," he began, and saw the quick color flame and die again in Jane's face.

"If you take it like that, you must," she said hopelessly.

"Why how else do you expect me to take it? You say you've thought the whole thing out so carefully, but have you given one moment's consideration to my position—the position you are putting me in? I may say that I've been building a good deal on pulling this thing off. It means a lot to me, personally, and I believe it means a lot to the country. I've reported the recovery of the case. Do you realize that I shall have to go back and say, 'Miss Bainwright has changed her mind. It seems to run in the family and she has destroyed the formula.' A nice, easy job for me, isn't it? My dear girl, do have a little common sense. The thing is war office property."

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

"Oh, is it?" said Jane, very short and sharp. "It's nothing of the sort! It's mine." She put out her hand. "I think you forgot that, Walter. It's mine. Please give it to me."

He reddened to the very roots of his hair. There was an endless pause. Jane's outstretched hand shook more and more. Walter thrust the case into it and turned his back.

"Very well," he said between his teeth, "take your property!" and walked over to the window and looked out fiercely.

The afternoon sunshine was all gone. The gray light that goes before the dusk made the room look cold.

Jane stood with the case in her hand and looked at Walter's massive back. He didn't move or turn around. He would never forgive her—not a second time. Oh, well, what did it matter? He would marry some woman who would say 'yes' when he said 'yes' and 'no' when he said 'no'. Jane hoped viciously that he would find it deadly dull and uninteresting.

At last she could stand it no longer. "Walie," she said in a little shaking voice. But he did not move. Then, after what seemed an age to her, he said gruffly:

"Well!"

"Walie, do turn round."

He turned then, showing a red face of wrath.

"Why don't you get it over with? Destroy the thing and be done with it." Jane nodded, biting her lips.

"Yes,—I must, Walie."

## THE RED LACQUER CASE

"Well, for heavens sake, why don't you do it? What are you waiting for?"

"I—I don't know," said Jane very miserably.—She walked over to the fire very slowly and stood there. "I suppose I'd better open the case first, and then—then burn the formula."

"Yes, I guess that would be a good plan," Walter's voice was polite and stiff. He spoke apparently to some acquaintance whom he disliked a good deal.

"You—you won't—"

"I beg your pardon?"

"No," said Jane, with half a sob, "of course you won't. Well, here goes."

She took the case in both hands and pressed the one fish and the rose, just as Ralph had showed her how to press. The lacquer cracked, the crack widened, the case divided. A folder paper showed against the steel lining.

Walter came a step nearer. Jane took out the paper and let the case fall upon the floor at her feet. She stretched out her hand over the flames, stretched it out and then drew it back quickly.

Something in the color of the paper, in the writing half seen by firelight, something, what she could not say, made her draw her hand back. Walter saw her open the paper and look at it. He heard her gasp and saw the color rush scarlet to her cheeks. She gave a laugh and a sob, and then she called his name.

"Oh, Walie," and as he came a long step nearer, she began to read aloud:

"Dear Jane: I have decided to take care of the

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formula myself. I will either destroy it or turn it over to Major Oakers.

Ralph Sanders."

Walter gave a shout of delight and caught her in his arms. They rocked together, the tears streaming down Jane's face.

"Oh, Walie, he was going to give the formula to you. For the government, and now he's gone and the formula is in his possession."

Walter hugged her, still tighter.

"The old fox. And he never said anything to me when I saw him."

"When—you—saw him? Ralph?"

"Yes, Ralph Sanders, Oh, dear little girl, that's right I never got the chance to tell you I found him."

"Found Ralph? Where?"

"Yes, the old rascal, he's in 'retirement' he told me on the other side of town. He's inventing a food for infants. He says he's not interested in the formula any more. In fact he's not interested in anything except his new invention."

"Yes, he's like that, Walie, the old dear."

Suddenly Jane began to cry.

"Jane darling, don't cry."

"I—must! I—afraid—you'll never forgive me, and—go away again, and—"

"I'll do nothing of the sort—I mean go away," corrected Walter quickly. "Jane dear I want you, as I have always wanted you. Now when can you be ready, we'll get married at once, before anything else can interrupt our plans."

"Walie!" sighed Jane, burying her head on his shoulder.

### **THE RED LACQUER CASE**

**"But, dearie," she spoke up timidly, "We can't get married until we locate dear old Ralph Sanders." She looked shyly up at his beaming face.**

**"Did you forget about his new invention?"**

**The End**











